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# **SComS**

## Thematic Section

Multimedia political communication.  
Channels, content, usage, and impact

Volume 25 (2025), Issue 2



## Multimedia political communication. Channels, content, usage, and impact

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Thirty years ago, the Society for the German Language chose “multimedia” as its ‘*Word of the Year 1995*’, positioning it as a guiding word for the journey into the brave new media world. At the time, multimedia referred to the integration of various modes of communication—including text, images, audio, video, and interactive elements—within a single, often digital, medium. Today, such integration has become an essential part of political communication, encompassing both traditional forms like election posters and flyers, as well as contemporary formats like politicians’ TikTok videos and political memes circulating across digital platforms.

Although terms such as “digitalization” and “hybridization” have taken precedence in recent scholarly discourse, this *Thematic Section* seeks to return “multimedia” to the center of scholarly debate, recognizing both its significance and continued evolution. As Jürgen Wilke (2003) once defined in the *Fischer Lexikon Publizistik Massenkommunikation*, multimedia stands for the integration of all possible modalities of communication: spoken language, text, video, audio, telecommunications, consumer electronics, and computer technology. This convergence, stimulated largely by digital innovation, is not limited to digital media—analogue materials such as campaign leaflets are also part of the broader multimedia ecosystem of political communication.

Both historical and contemporary examples illustrate the potency of multimedia communication in the political sphere. The transformative role of television is epitomized by the famous debate between John F. Kennedy

and Richard Nixon, where Kennedy’s energetic television presence is widely credited with shaping the election outcome (Jamieson & Birdsell, 1990). Additionally, the widespread creation, sharing, and adaptation of memes—multimedia fusions of visuals, text, and tags—highlight new forms of participatory political engagement in digital arenas (Paciello et al., 2021). Furthermore, the proliferation of audiovisual platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, and Instagram demonstrates the increasing importance and reach of multimedia content in contemporary political communication (Marquart, 2023).

This *Thematic Section* aims to explore the diverse forms and effects of multimedia in political communication by assembling a selection of papers initially presented at the joint annual meeting of the “Communication and Politics” division of the *German Communication Association* (DGPK) and the “Political Communication” division of the *Swiss Association of Communication and Media Research* (SACM), held at the University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons, Bern, in February 2024.

The section opens with the article “More of the same or manifold perspectives?” by Kira Klinger, Florian Wintterlin, Julia Metag, and Lukas Lindenschmidt (University of Münster). Through a systematic literature review, they introduce the current state of research on politicians’ use of social media, revealing a predominance of content analyses of Twitter data from the USA and Europe. Following this overview, several articles turn a closer eye on media content itself.

Tasmin Kaltschmitt, Laura Kaspar, Annika Diehl, Antonia Schmitt & Ole Kelm (Heinrich-



Table 1: Characteristics of the contributions

Author(s)	Medium of analysis	Research area	Geographical context	Method and design
Kira Klinger, Florian Wintterlin, Julia Metag, Lukas Lindenschmidt	Social media	Academic literature	International	Standardized content analysis
Tasmin Kaltschmitt, Laura Kaspar, Annika Diehl, Antonia Schmitt & Ole Kelm	Entertainment podcasts	Media content	Germany	Standardized content analysis
Judith Reinbold	Facebook	Media content	Germany	Qualitative framing analysis of Text and Images
Florin Zai & Dominique Wirz	Instagram	Media use	Switzerland	Standardized survey
Johanna Burger	Local media	Media use and effect	Switzerland	Standardized survey

Heine University Düsseldorf), in their article “Hello Hackis, stay at home!”, investigate how politics and political decisions were referenced during the COVID-19 pandemic in popular German entertainment podcasts, highlighting how hosts used these platforms to address political topics during a critical period.

Judith Reinbold (Zeppelin University), in her article entitled “From ‘War Hero’ to ‘Peace Hero’?”, examines the Bundeswehr’s Facebook presence to analyze how German soldiers participating in the MINUSMA peace-keeping mission are portrayed. Her qualitative framing analysis finds that heroism is a central motif, depicting German soldiers as both peacekeepers and protectors of civilians, in line with Germany’s political commitments.

The two final papers focus on the use of multimedia content: Florin Zai (University of Fribourg) and Dominique Wirz (University of Amsterdam), in their article “News usage on Instagram,” explore how Swiss adults who frequently use Instagram encounter news, finding that the platform is mainly used for entertainment and that most news exposure is incidental. Users with higher political interest also tend to engage more with news, while those with moderate interest prefer entertainment-oriented outlets.

Johanna Burger (University of Applied Sciences of the Grisons, Freie Universität Berlin), in her contribution “No local news-

papers, but WhatsApp?” analyzes political information use at the local level, expanding the geographical and thematic scope of the section. Her study identifies political information repertoires that are linked to differences in voter turnout and practice, underscoring the democratic relevance of local media access and use.

Together, the contributions reflect the richness and methodological diversity of multimedia research in the field of political communication, with a particular emphasis on social media. They examine content produced by both journalistic and political actors (see Table 1). Key questions revolve around the character of media content, its usage, and its effects, analyzed via content analyses, surveys (both standardized and qualitative), and with a notable focus on Germany and Switzerland.

We hope that you enjoy reading this issue as much as we did and find inspiration for further scholarly exploration.

We would like to thank the editorial team of *Studies in Communication Sciences* (SComS) for giving us the opportunity to guest-edit this thematic section. We would also like to express our special thanks to Philipp Bachmann for his tremendous support.

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Julian Maitra, Philipp Müller, Quirin Ryffel, and Seraina Tarnutzer.

### Conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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## More of the same or manifold perspectives? A systematic review of research on politicians' use of social media

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### Abstract

The increasing importance of social media in political communication since Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign has led to a highly productive, dynamic, and ever-growing field of scholars researching the use of social media by politicians. However, academic literature in recent years has also featured debates about the heterogeneity of research in this area. It is commonly assumed and critically discussed that these studies primarily revolve around a U.S. context and use Twitter as a primary source of data, and that research time frames focus on election campaigns and neglect communication outside of election times. Yet, we still lack the data to support these assumptions. Against this background, we systematically analyze, document, and discuss the diversity of existing research on politicians' use of social media between 2004 and 2020. In this context, we investigate the research objects of the existing studies, the theoretical backgrounds and methods used, and where they were conducted.

### Keywords

politicians, social media use, literature review, political communication

## 1 Introduction

Due to their “interactive and participatory nature [...] and politicians' need to connect” (Graham, 2013, p. 694), social media has become a central space for political communication over the past two decades. Platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, or Facebook offer politicians a quick and targeted way to disseminate political information and thus promote their own agenda, mobilize, connect, and interact with prospective voters—all independent of the gatekeepers of traditional media (Ahmed et al., 2017; Kruike-meier et al., 2018; Lassen & Brown, 2011). Furthermore, social media offers politicians the opportunity to share multimodal content, incorporating textual, audio-visual, and interactive features. The significance of multimodal communication in political contexts was recognized even before the advent of social media (e.g. Grabe & Bucy, 2009), but its importance has surged with the rise of social media platforms (e.g. Hameleers et al., 2020).

The increased use of social media has given rise to a productive and dynamic field of research whose starting point is often traced back to Barack Obama's 2008 presidential campaign, in which social media played a significant role for the first time (Vaccari, 2010). In this field, many studies have emerged investigating to what extent, for what reasons, and on what occasions politicians use social media. The abundance of studies has led to the emergence of some systematic or broad reviews that attempt to provide an overview of the existing research and summarize and evaluate the findings. However, these studies tend to focus on a specific aspect. For example, Jungherr (2016) examined Twitter use by parties, candidates, and the public during election periods, thus emphasizing a particular social media platform and limiting it to elections. Boulianne (2015) took a citizen-centered perspective and provided an overview of social media use and political participation research. Tursunbayeva et al. (2017) investigated the use of social media



by public health organizations, adopting the perspective that these organizations are part of the government and, thus, political actors. Finally, Brito et al. (2021) used a systematic review to explore the extent to which social media data can predict election outcomes. However, despite this proliferation of systematic literature reviews and meta-analyses, there is still a lack of an overview of politicians' use of social media that does not consider only one specific social media platform or focus only on elections.

In our review, we examine the heterogeneity of the research field. In ecological research, heterogeneity is defined as "the difference or diversity in kind or arrangement of component elements or constituents. Such differences can occur across both space and time. It is the notion of the relative arrangement of elements rather than simply their occurrence that differentiates heterogeneity from that of diversity" (Abson, 2017). At its core, the concept of heterogeneity refers to the relative distribution of elements in an environment.

The heterogeneity of a research field is commonly assessed in meta-analyses as between-study variance and conceptualized as methodological and statistical heterogeneity (Higgins & Thompson, 2002). In our case, we do not include statistical comparisons of effects or empirical findings but focus on the *methodological heterogeneity*. This refers to the design of the study and includes the research object of the study, the analyzed data, and the method used to examine the research questions. We therefore ask:

- › RQ1: How pronounced is the methodological heterogeneity of the research field on the use of social media by politicians?

We additionally examined how scholars theoretically derive their hypotheses or research questions. The theoretical background of the studies can be differentiated in the micro, meso, and macro level. Micro-level theories are individual-based and typically deal with an individual's cognition, emotions, or actions; meso-level theories are generally concerned with relationships among groups of individuals, organizations, and institutions; and macro-level theories address relation-

ships within social systems. In political communication, there are several established theories that have guided research for decades (Blumler, 2015). Looking at politicians' use of social media, we expect foundational theories to be present, as well as theories on the digital era of political communication.

With regard to the analyzed data, we distinguish between generated data (e.g., survey-based data) and found data. In social media, found data mainly occur as digital trace data. Digital trace data document every interaction users have with digital services and are not created and provided based on research designs (Jungherr, 2016, 2019). Social media platforms offer multiple ways to capture data, most commonly through an *application programming interface* (API). Generated data stands in marked contrast to research based on found data, where data *are* produced and provided according to a specific research design (e.g., surveys or experiments).

As our review focuses on politicians, the research object can be individual politicians or broader groups of politicians, such as members of parliament or the government.

With regard to the method used, we want to examine if people approach the field using content analyses, surveys, interviews, experiments, or observations. Qualitative scholarship is rare in political communication in general (Gagrčin & Butkowski, 2023) and content analyses are expected to be the most common method (Blassnig, 2023).

Going beyond methodological heterogeneity, we add *contextual heterogeneity* as a dimension to evaluate the heterogeneity of a research field. We ask:

- › RQ2: How pronounced is the contextual heterogeneity of the research field on the use of social media by politicians?

Contextual heterogeneity is an established concept in management research and contains four aspects: temporal, institutional, social, and spatial (Zahra & Wright, 2011).

The temporal context concerns the time when the study is conducted. With regard to social media and politics, research often mentions that studies tend to analyze politicians' social media use during election campaigns and, to a lesser extent, during other periods

(Fuller et al., 2018; Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2020). This may be because political communication is considered even more relevant, and politicians are significantly more active on social media during those campaigns (Lilleker et al., 2017).

The institutional context captures the external environment in which the study is located. We translate this as the platform the study examines. Twitter is assumed to be the primary data source in such studies because it is one of the most frequently used social media platforms for political communication (Jungherr, 2016; Metag & Rauchfleisch, 2016). According to the “easy data hypothesis,” (Özkula et al., 2023) Twitter is the most researched platform, as its data are easily accessible to researchers through API services. However, research also falls short when it focuses on Twitter, as the tandem use of different social media platforms is “a double-barreled gun, whereby Twitter and Facebook can each serve a different target” (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020, p. 612), as well as the different capabilities, genres, and audiences of social media (Kreiss et al., 2018), which show how other platforms can serve different campaign purposes. Because most reviews focus only on a specific social media platform, they neglect these particular capabilities and do not consider, for example, the relevance of features such as visual communication.

Under social context, we understand the network the researchers are embedded in with their study. More precisely, we are interested in the discipline the authors of the studies originate from and the degree of interdisciplinarity of author teams. Additionally, we include the gender of the authors as an important factor. In political communication (Evans & Bucy, 2010) as well as other important areas of the field (Schatto-Eckrodt & Quandt, 2023), introspections identified a clear imbalance regarding the gender of the first authors, with female authors being largely underrepresented.

Spatial context refers to geographical aspects, namely the country where the study is conducted. It is commonly believed that studies on politicians’ social media use predominantly focus on a U.S. context (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014) and are conducted by U.S. scholars (Trepte & Loths, 2020). U.S. election

campaigns were the first in which politicians used social media to any significant extent and were therefore focused on in research in the last decades.

Our systematic review analyzes a large corpus of studies on politicians’ use of social media—not limited to a particular social media platform, country, or election campaign—in terms of the contextual and methodological heterogeneity of the field. The findings of the review contribute to the field in several ways. Findings on contextual heterogeneity make it possible to assess blind spots regarding time, place, and perspectives on the field that limit the generalizability of claims about politicians’ use of social media. Findings on methodological heterogeneity help to identify trends and biases in research on politicians’ use of social media that could guide future research in identifying gaps in the literature that need to be filled.

## 2 Scope, materials, and method

To proceed, however, we first explain the term social media to capture the subject of our study. Following Kaplan and Haenlein (2010, p. 61) and Carr and Hayes (2015, p. 52), we define social media as a group of internet-based personal communication channels allowing users to create or consume user-generated content and interact with others. Such interactions may occur either in real time or asynchronously with a broad or selected audience. The group of users proves to be highly diverse; their nature ranges from non-professional to professional, from private to institutional, and from non-strategic to strategic.

Undisputedly, social media plays a critical role for political actors and strategic communication in political campaigns. Politicians benefit from opportunities to distribute messages quickly, directly, spatially and temporally unrestricted, and with potentially high reach. These benefits allow users to take public positions on current events, communicate interactively, and address (potential) supporters (e.g. Bronstein et al., 2018; Caton et al., 2015; Quinlan et al., 2018). Such communication and messaging can bring issues of interest onto the public agenda and bypass traditional gatekeepers. The broader rele-

vance of social media for political communication today is also evident in the vast corpus of scientific research on this matter.

To draw conclusions about the heterogeneity or homogeneity of the research landscape, we systematically analyze, document, and discuss the various dimensions and inherent elements of existing research on politicians' use of social media. Thus, we provide insight into the research field's diversity in terms of (1) author and publication details; (2) theoretical backgrounds; (3) methodology and data collection; and (4) places, platforms, time periods, and persons of interest.

## 2.1 Data selection and coding process

In designing and conducting our research, we followed Fink's (2014) best practices for systematic reviews. These practices include formulating a concrete research objective, selecting appropriate databases and search criteria, applying contextual screening criteria, training coders, and reviewing and synthesizing results.

We took two approaches to compiling relevant research articles: a systematic keyword-based search and a nonsystematic snowball search based on the identified relevant publications. In the first step, we used a total of five databases to compile a core set of research articles: *Social Science Citation Index* (SSCI), *IEEE Xplore Digital Library*, *ACM Digital Library* (ACM), *Google Scholar*, and *Communication & Mass Media Complete* (CMMC). We based the selection of databases on further key studies conducted within the research field (e.g., Jungherr, 2016). The content and formulation of our studies' objectives set the course for the search criteria applied. Since our thematic focus was on the use of social media by politicians, a combination of the word stems *politician\** and *use\** was merged with a set of terms (more general or specific) representing social media (such as *social AND media*, *social AND network\**, *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Instagram*, *Weibo*, and *YouTube*). This search string was applied uniformly across all platforms. We decided not to include names of specific politicians because that would inevitably induce bias by excluding studies of less prominent politicians. The search criteria had to be part of the article's title, abstract, or keywords. The time span of the publication dates

examined ranged from 2004 to the end of 2020. The launch of Facebook in 2004 was the decisive factor in determining the analysis period.

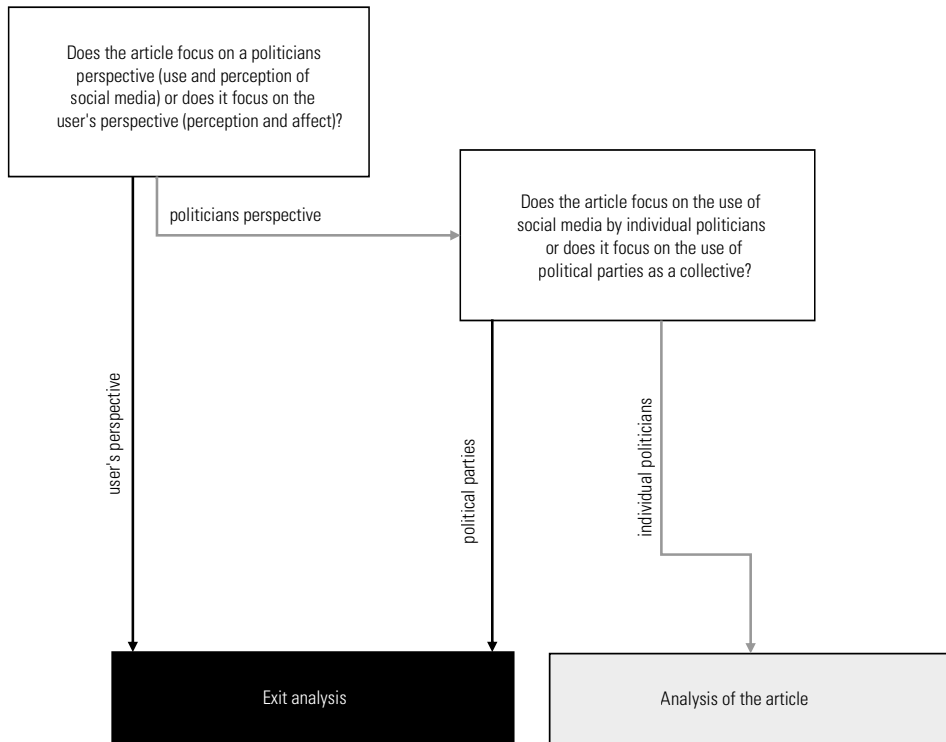
Thus, we were able to consider the period before the postulated onset of scientific interest, which dates back to Barack Obama's presidential campaign in 2008 (Vaccari, 2010). Based on abstract screening, two coders decided on the inclusion or exclusion of an article within the scope of this literature review. A given publication had to be written in English and focus on politicians' use of social media. For example, articles about other users' perceptions and the impact of political communication by politicians on social media did not meet our research objective. In addition, the article had to focus on the use of social media by individual politicians; articles focusing exclusively on political parties were excluded.

In the second step, we conducted a snowball search to round out the body of literature. This means, that the works cited in the identified studies were reviewed and based on the titles of the references it was decided on whether there were other studies worth searching for and including in the sample. Such a nonsystematic search allowed us to identify studies that had been overlooked in a systematic search, even though they were relevant to the research field (Jungherr, 2016). A total of 441 publications were identified in both steps, but 228 of these were excluded due to duplication, language, screening criteria, or unavailability of articles, i. e., articles were not accessible due to missing licenses. However, only a few articles were unavailable. This left a final sample of 213 articles.

Two coders were trained to code the articles identified and deemed relevant during the literature search and screening based on a comprehensive coding scheme (see Table 2 in the Supplementary Material for an overview of the coded variables). The scheme was then organized into four main content areas: (1) article-related characteristics, (2) theoretical background, (3) methodology and data collection, and (4) content-related characteristics.

Technical variables such as an assigned coder number, the article ID, and the coding date were followed by (1) a first set of variables that initially collected background information on the author and publication details. The latter include article titles, types

Figure 1: Decision tree



(differentiated by categories such as journal articles, conference proceedings, working papers, empirical articles, conceptual articles or theoretical essays, review articles, or meta-analyses), publication journals, and years. Author-related variables include gender, academic discipline, institutional affiliation, and the first authors' continents and countries.

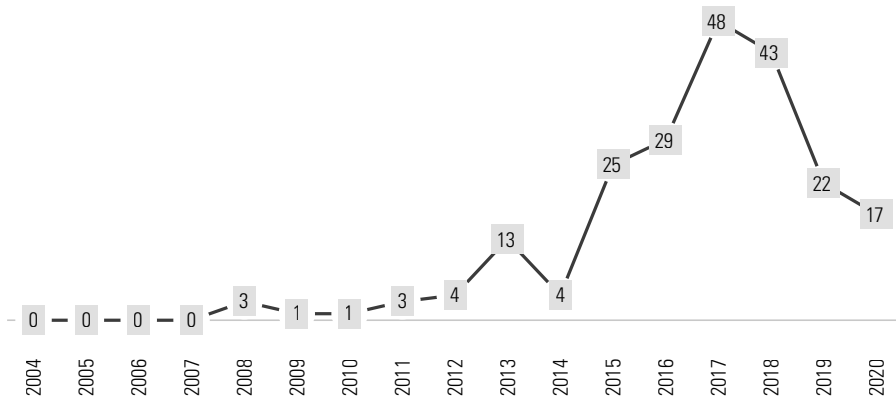
The second variable, block (2), aimed to identify underlying theoretical concepts in research on politicians' use of social media. We were mainly interested in the theories referenced, the level of the theories used (micro, meso, macro), and if the authors developed their own models. First, we collected the theories or models in an open-ended field to comprehensively capture the theoretical concepts. Second, an inductive systematization was performed to identify foci among the underlying theories.

Our third set of variables (3) focused on methodological implementation and data

collection. We addressed the methods, analytic approaches (e.g., quantitative, qualitative), and whether the studies were confirmatory or exploratory. As for the data collected, we sought to identify the type of data analyzed (e.g., data generated or found, criteria for data selection, units of analysis), the continents and countries from which the data originated, the social media of interest, the year(s) and duration of data collection, and whether it spanned election periods.

The last of the four sets of variables (4) was devoted to the politicians themselves. We determined which politicians the studies referred to, whether they were primarily active at the local, national, or international level, and whether the studies distinguished between self- or editorial use of accounts.

Very few of this total set of variables were subsequently added to the codebook. This mainly affected variables that could be derived from others in the codebook, such as

Figure 2: Number of articles published per year ( $n=213$ )

the gender of the first author or whether the study was conducted in one or more countries. Because these variables were subsequently included in the codebook, intercoder reliability was established by two additional coders.

In total, the coding scheme consisted of 36 variables (excluding sub-variables). Based on a random sample of 18 articles (approximately 10%), intercoder reliability reached a good value of 0.92 (Krippendorff's alpha; see Table 2 in the Supplementary Material for a more detailed report).

## 2.2 Final sample

The final sample comprised a total of 213 articles on politicians' use of social media (references to these articles are listed in Table 1 of the Supplementary Material). The vast majority (87.7%,  $n=187$ ) were journal articles; 10.3% ( $n=22$ ) were conference proceedings; and 1.9% of the total sample were other contributions ( $n=4$ ). Although these included some theoretical essays or conceptual articles (2.3%,  $n=5$ ) and review articles (0.5%,  $n=1$ ), empirical articles predominated at 96.2% ( $n=205$ ). Based on the publication years (Figure 1), we can see that scholarly interest dates back to 2008 but only began to increase sharply in 2015. The research landscape peaked in terms of new contributions in 2017 but declined in subsequent years.

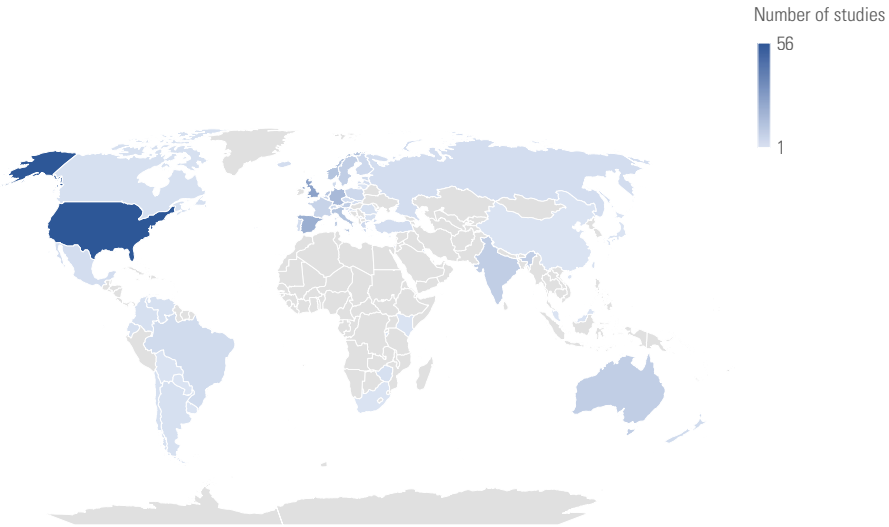
## 3 Results

In the following, we provide a comprehensive overview of the results obtained from the systematic analysis of the empirical articles ( $n=205$ ). We have divided the results into two subsections based on the study's objective of assessing the diversity of research on politicians' use of social media with regard to its contextual and methodological heterogeneity.

(1) Contextual heterogeneity: In this section, we offer insights into the main distributions that indicate the degree of heterogeneity within the origin of the studies in our sample. Background information provided here includes the temporal, institutional, social, and spatial context of research in our sample.

*Social context:* Regarding the gender of the first author, approximately 66% of the articles were written by male first authors ( $n=134$ ). On the other hand, female first authors only appeared in 30% of the reviewed articles ( $n=63$ ), while in a few cases, the gender was not identifiable ( $n=8$ ). Using the Simpson-index as a measurement for diversity (Simpson, 1949), the diversity is low ( $D=.48$ ).

To analyze the research areas to which the authors belonged, we considered the assigned (university) department or unit of all contributing authors. In our sample, we found that most research was conducted by teams from one single discipline (61.0%,  $n=125$ ). Inter-

Figure 3: Countries of interest ( $n=205$ )

disciplinary teams<sup>1</sup> were only responsible for 22.0% of the studies ( $n=45$ ), and 17.1% of the studies included authors with not identifiable affiliation ( $n=35$ ). Communication researchers were part of 48.8% of the teams ( $n=100$ ), followed by political scientists (15.1%,  $n=31$ ), computer scientists (12.2%,  $n=25$ ), sociologists (3.4%,  $n=7$ ), and psychologists (2.0%,  $n=4$ ). 56 authors (27.3%) came from other disciplines.<sup>2</sup> This represents a high diversity ( $D=.76$ ).

*Spatial context:* There was a clear Western bias among the countries of interest, with more than half of the studies involving Europe (50.7%,  $n=104$ ) and North America (29.3%,  $n=60$ ). On the other hand, studies conducted in Asia accounted for 16.6% ( $n=34$ ), and research conducted in Australia or Oceania accounted for 5.9% ( $n=12$ ). Thus, the Global South was severely underrepresented, with Africa accounting for 1.8% ( $n=4$ ) and South America for 2.7% ( $n=6$ ) of studies. In total, there was a medium diversity of the countries of interest ( $D=.57$ ). The Western dominance is supported by the fact that the United States

(27.3%,  $n=56$ ) was by far the most studied country, followed by the United Kingdom (12.7%,  $n=26$ ), Spain (10.2%,  $n=21$ ), and Germany (8.3%,  $n=17$ ; Figure 4).

Given that our data showed that cross-country studies (12.2%,  $n=25$ ) were rare in the area studied, this dominance is especially noteworthy.

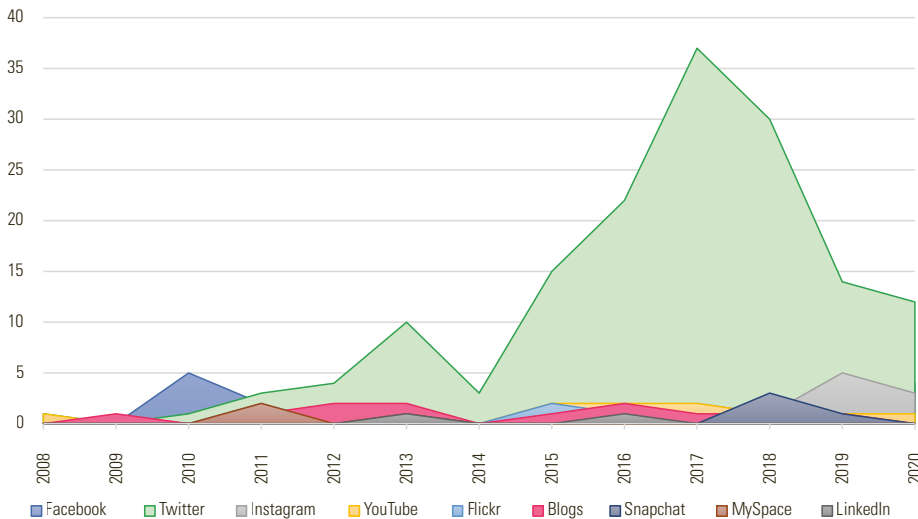
*Temporal context:* In terms of data collection periods (i. e., when the data collection occurred), most researchers collected their data within a single year (61.5%,  $n=126$ ). In comparison, others extended a single data collection period over two or more years (18.5%,  $n=38$ ). Only a small proportion of studies included two or more waves of data collection (17.0%,  $n=35$ ), and when this occurred, it spanned several more years (10.7%,  $n=22$ ) than a single year (6.3%,  $n=13$ ). Overall, the longitudinal study with the most extended data collection period within our sample spanned five years. This represents a low diversity in this category ( $D=.55$ ). Election periods (74.1%,  $n=152$ ) dominate as the time periods in which the studies were conducted indicating a low diversity ( $D=.42$ ).

*Institutional context:* In terms of the platforms of interest, our results showed a strong dominance of Twitter-based studies (74.1%,  $n=152$ ), followed by Facebook (41.0%,  $n=84$ ). On the other hand, platforms focused on visu-

1 Interdisciplinarity has been coded in cases of multiple disciplines among an article's authors. The associated departments of all authors were coded for this purpose.

2 Due to multiple response options, total percentages may exceed 100%.

Figure 4: Platforms studied over time



al content, such as Instagram (6.3%,  $n = 13$ ) or YouTube (5.9%,  $n = 12$ ), were very rarely studied (Figure 5). This represents a low diversity ( $D = .54$ )<sup>3</sup>

Overall, the contextual heterogeneity in our sample is rather low. In all categories, one characteristic dominates. A typical study on politicians' use of social media is from a male communication scholar researching Twitter communication in Europe or North America using a rather short period of time for data collection during an election campaign.

(2) Methodological heterogeneity: In this section, we offer insights into the main distributions that indicate the degree of heterogeneity of how the studies are designed. Background information provided here includes the theoretical background, the kind of analyzed data, the research objects, and the methodological approaches used in the studies.

*Theoretical Background:* To explore the theoretical background of the studies, we proceeded in two ways. First, we examined the different levels (*micro*, *meso*, *macro*, or each in combination) to which the theoretical

backgrounds refer. Our results showed that most studies related to the meso-level (24.8%, e.g., agenda-setting [McCombs & Shaw, 1972]), followed by theoretical backgrounds related to the micro-level (12.9%, e.g., two-step flow of communication [Lazarsfeld et al., 1948]). Macro-level theories occurred much less frequently (3.4%, e.g., systems theory [Luhmann, 2000]). Other studies applied theories addressing multiple (or even all) levels. The combination of micro- and meso-level theories was the most frequent combination (27.7%), followed by a combination of meso- and macro-level (10.9%), and the link between micro- and macro-level (2.0%). A combination of theories on all levels was employed by 17.8% of the studies.

Second, we conducted an inductive systematization of the theoretical frameworks themselves. To this end, in the first step, coherent theories and theoretical reference points, or concepts and models underlying the studies, were derived and collected through open-ended coding. In the second step, we attempted to cluster the theoretical backgrounds. The resulting categories were intended to encompass various sub-disciplines and perspectives, moving beyond a small-scale breakdown by (merely) communication science theories. In this way, we were able to capture both coherent theories

3 To contextualize the results, we must account for the year of foundation of the platforms. MySpace and LinkedIn were launched in 2003, Facebook and Flickr in 2004, YouTube in 2005, Twitter in 2006, Instagram in 2010, and Snapchat in 2011.

**Table 1: Inductive systematization of theoretical frameworks**

Inductive categories	Description and Examples
(1) Politicians' communication behavior and strategies	Theoretical references to the communication behavior of politicians or to strategies that can also affect content (e. g., personalization of politics and political communication, strategic framing, populist strategies, and self-presentation theory).
(2) Representation of political actors online	Theoretical references to normalization and equalization theses and related concepts such as techno-optimism vs. techno-pessimism are captured here. The key question is to what extent social media help increase the visibility of minor political parties, politicians, and their content, thus contributing to the equalization or normalization of inter-party competition.
(3) Social media, politics, and media change	Addresses media change as a theoretical concept related to social media and politics (e. g., in the context of mediatization or hybrid media systems).
(4) Approaches to election campaign communication	Since political communication via social media in election campaigns is a particularly prominent subject of the research field under investigation, this category contains various explanations of the specifics of elections, election campaigns, and the associated use of social media (e. g., permanent campaigning).
(5) Concepts of public(s) on social media	Theoretical references that either integrate existing theories of the public (network) sphere, apply them to social media, or address general connections between social media platforms and the (political) public sphere (e. g., the impact of politicians' communications on agenda building).
(6) Theoretical approaches to (user) interaction	Theoretical description or classification of interaction phenomena that incorporate the perspective of politicians as communicators on the one hand and that of users on the other (e. g., two-way engagement with potential voters; ego-alter ties).
(7) Platform characteristics as conceptual arguments	Concepts that explicitly address the platform's features are examined. The corresponding studies often rely on empirical or conceptual arguments rather than established theories (e. g., Twitter as a tool of political opposition).
(8) Democratic-theoretical implications of social media	Theoretical concepts based mainly on political science that address political processes in the field under study and their (potential) impact on democratic structures (e. g., the cyber-democratic model of democracy; populism on Twitter).

from different academic disciplines and single conceptual arguments underlying the theoretical rationale of the articles.

We identified the following eight different types of foci among the underlying theories: frameworks focusing on (1) politicians' communication behavior and strategies; (2) the representation of political actors online; (3) social media, politics, and media change; (4) approaches to election campaign communication; (5) concepts of public(s) on social media; (6) theoretical approaches to (user) interaction; (7) platform features as conceptual arguments; and (8) democratic theory implications of social media (see Table 1).

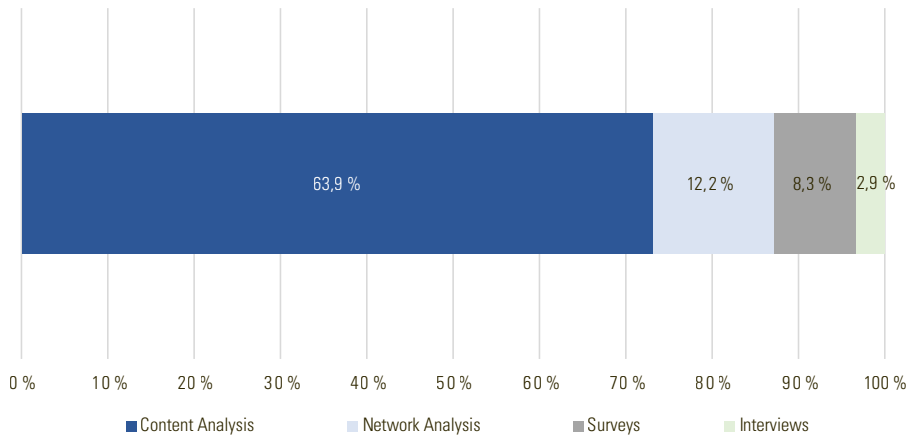
In most of the studies reviewed, more than one of these types occurred. The most prominent theoretical framework in our sample was an approach to the representation of

political actors online, such as normalization or equalization hypotheses, followed by approaches capturing media change due to the rise of social media, such as hybridization, intersections between media and politics, such as agenda building or mediatization, and approaches to politicians' communication behavior, such as framing or personalization. References to persuasion and conceptualizations of the public sphere were rare in our sample.

Notably, only a minimal number of studies (3.4%,  $n=7$ ) presented or developed their own theoretical framework or modified an established framework.

*Research objects:* Although the search string limited the research object to politicians, we want to know on a more detailed level whose social media communication was specifically examined. More than half of the

Figure 5: Methodological approaches (of empirical articles)



studies (54.7%) focused on larger groups of politicians (e.g., all members of parliament) who were not identified by name (the focus instead tended to be on the political position or function). Nevertheless, Donald Trump, Hillary Clinton, and Barack Obama stood out as persons of interest and were studied more than twice as often as the most frequently studied non-U.S. politician, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi. Again, the dominance of studies in the U.S. context is evident, as 32 (15.9%) studies focused on U.S. presidential candidates, including primaries. Another notable finding is the dominance of interest in candidates rather than officeholders. In this context, it should also be noted that most of those studied have acted at the national (78.6%,  $n=176$ ) or local (14.3%,  $n=32$ ) political level indicating a low diversity ( $D=.39$ ). Although the research field under investigation is limited to the use of social media by individual politicians, based on our keyword search, it is noteworthy that some studies (16.6%,  $n=34$ ) also examined collective accounts. However, only a few studies (11.4%,  $n=24$ ) investigated whether the account was used by the politicians themselves or by an editorial team.

*Analyzed data:* Following the differentiation of found and generated data, found data are the most common type of data in our sample (88.8%,  $n=182$ ) indicating a very low diversity ( $D=.21$ ). We examined the data selection criteria and the units of analysis to

gain insight into the criteria used to select and collect these data for subsequent analysis and to determine what type of data was ultimately analyzed. It became clear that certain politicians' accounts were the predominant source of data selection. The accounts selected for investigation were either person-specific or based on key features of an account, such as the number of followers or posts (91.4%,  $n=191$ ).<sup>4</sup> In addition to account-specific data selection criteria, features of the broader platform ecology, such as hashtags (1.9%,  $n=4$ ), @-mentions (2.4%,  $n=5$ ), or keywords (1.4%,  $n=3$ ), were also used, but to a much lesser extent, for the accounts of the targeted politicians.

In terms of units of analysis,<sup>5</sup> we clearly identified the textual content of the posts (22.6%,  $n=148$ ) and the interaction of the politicians with the audience (measured, for example, by the frequency of @mentions, comments, replies, likes, or retweets; 18.6%,  $n=122$ ) as the main focus of the analyses in the research based on the found data. Network metrics (such as the number of followers) were also frequently examined (10.5%,  $n=69$ ). Analyses of visual communication in the form of videos (5.2%,  $n=34$ ) or images (7.8%,  $n=51$ ) appeared but were less present

<sup>4</sup> Due to multiple response options, total percentages may exceed 100%.

<sup>5</sup> Due to multiple response options, total percentages may exceed 100%.

in our sample, as were analyses of links (6.4%,  $n=42$ ) and hashtags (4.4%,  $n=29$ ). The examination of audio material played a minor role in this field of research (1.2%,  $n=8$ ). By their inherent nature, these studies rarely limited their analyses to a single unit but analyzed many factors side by side.

*Methodological approaches:* We distinguished not only between data types consulted but also between different methodological approaches applied across research. Given the dominance of digital trace data, content analyses were the most common (63.9%,  $n=131$ ), followed by network analysis (12.2%,  $n=25$ ). The low prevalence of generated data (5.4%,  $n=11$ ) was also reflected in the infrequent use of surveys (8.3%,  $n=17$ ) or interviews (2.9%,  $n=6$ ; Figure 3). Given the specific focus of this systematic review, the lack of experimental studies in our sample is hardly surprising. Overall the methodological diversity is low ( $D=.44$ ).

Overall, the findings on the methodological heterogeneity of the studies included in our sample were mixed. The theoretical backgrounds were rather diverse, and there is substantial variation in the research objects examined. However, the analyzed data were mainly found data approached with content analyses.

#### 4 Discussion

Our systematic review has shown that, at the latest, after Donald Trump's election victory in 2016, the number of studies on politicians' use of social media has increased significantly in academia. Within this growing body of research, our comprehensive literature review aims to uncover focal points within international research to assess the field's homogeneity.

We compared the number of studies included in our systematic review with reviews in other fields to get a sense of the size of the research field. Although the reviews covered different time periods and thematic foci, the number of studies on politicians' use of social media identified in our study seems to represent a fairly large research field. For example, Jungherr (2016) included 127 articles on Twitter use in election campaigns between 2008

and 2014; Boulianne (2015) included 36 articles on social media use and political participation; and Brito et al. (2021) identified 83 articles on election outcomes and social media.

Despite the size of the research field discussed here, the overall heterogeneity of the field is low. In all areas investigated—objects of study, theoretical backgrounds, methods, platforms, and origins of studies—we found clear patterns and perspectives that dominate.

The assumption that studies from the Western context dominate (Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014) was confirmed. Europe and North America accounted for over 70% of the studies. This finding mirrors the results of studies that have examined national diversity in communication journals in general (Trepte & Loths, 2020) and in other fields of communication science, such as journalism (Schatto-Eckrodt & Quandt, 2023), which also found low national diversity. Our finding in the context of social media is particularly problematic, as other studies focusing on audiences have shown that citizens' use of social media for political information is more pronounced in Latin America, Africa, and Asia than in Western countries (Newman et al., 2022). Therefore, focusing on the Western context may cause the researcher to overlook key social media developments around the world.

We also found a dominance of male authors in the field, indicating the need to increase inclusivity, not only in authors' origins.

Looking at the platforms, we found evidence for the easy data hypothesis in our results. Twitter was the most studied platform, followed by Facebook. Visual platforms such as YouTube and Instagram were significantly outnumbered, which could be related to the availability of data and the complexity of analyzing visuals. The later adoption of Instagram as a communication channel for politicians could also play a role. As our results revealed, the standard method for approaching politicians' use of social media was to conduct quantitative content analyses, partly using a computational approach. While the easy data hypothesis proposed by Burgess and Bruns (2015) highlighted Twitter hashtags in particular as "low-hanging fruit" (p. 107) in terms of data collection in social

media environments, this was not supported by our findings. Most studies focused on the accounts of specific politicians and their number of tweets or followers. Nonetheless, the results indicate that numerous studies fail to exploit the potential of social media for disseminating multimodal content. Research on visuals is infrequent, and studies considering the combination of different modalities of information on social media are scarce. This is despite evidence suggesting that politicians can achieve a significant impact through the use of multimodal content (e.g. Pettersson et al., 2023). Burgess and Bruns (2015) described the samples of these studies as “modestly sized sets of tweets and certain associated, predetermined metadata matching a keyword search over a short, recent period of time” (p. 106). Data based on broader platform ecologies, such as hashtags or keywords, were rarely used.

We also identified a lack of qualitative studies that would better circumvent the technical limitations of platform APIs and the limitations of standardized approaches to analyzing visual and audiovisual content and account for different platforms’ different capabilities. The research field also lacks non-text-based methods, such as interviews, surveys, or observations, to gain insights into the motivation behind politicians’ social media use.

More than 80% of the studies examined campaign periods, which is consistent with other research on social media use in politics (Fuller et al., 2018; Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2020). This dominance of election campaigns can be seen as consistent with the dominance of cross-sectional studies. The focus on more event-oriented research leads to more marginal insights into the use of political social media as a dynamic process. Nevertheless, our sample identified several longitudinal studies, some of which cover extended periods of time.

## 5 Conclusion, limitations, and outlook

There are several limitations to consider when interpreting our results. First, based on our sample, we can only speak to studies whose authors present their findings in English. Pub-

lications in other languages were not part of our analysis, which could confound the results toward a Western bias in the field. Second, we used a search string that explicitly looked for individual politicians’ use of social media. Therefore, we cannot make any assertions about social media use in politics in general, by parties, or by political institutions. The third limitation also results from the use of a predefined search string for certain databases. We did not include unpublished articles, technical reports, dissertations, or research published in edited volumes. Also, some articles could not be accessed due to missing licenses. Fourth, classifying methodological and theoretical approaches to include them as categories in a content analysis always runs the risk of losing important details. Finally, our study analyzes the heterogeneity of a research field with regard to specific aspects while neglecting other aspects. For example, we were not able to include more information about biases in where the studies are positioned theoretically, which discourses they contribute to and how that reflects a bias towards dominant discourses originating in the West. Thus, especially in the case of theoretical approaches, more detailed coding of theories could provide a more nuanced picture of the development of theory in the field of politicians’ use of social media.

Nevertheless, we believe that our review provides a systematic overview of politicians’ use of social media that can provide guidelines for future studies in the field. In addition, we identified research gaps that suggest that scholars expand their thematic foci, the methods used, and the perspectives adopted when considering social media and its use in politics. In summary, the findings of our review call for more diverse approaches focusing on the Global South, the role of visuals in political communication via social media, longitudinal studies, and studies outside of election campaigns that do not use found data.

## Conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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## „Hallo Hackis, bleibt zuhause!“ Eine Fallstudie zur Darstellung von Politik und COVID-19 in deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts

### „Hello Hackis, stay at home!“ A case study on the representation of politics and COVID-19 in German entertainment podcasts

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#### Abstract

In den vergangenen Jahren ist die Podcastnutzung kontinuierlich angestiegen, wobei insbesondere Unterhaltungspodcasts an Popularität gewonnen haben. Die Inhalte dieser Podcasts sind aber weitgehend unerforscht. Dies ist insofern bemerkenswert, da regelmäßige Hörer\*innen parasoziale Beziehungen zu den Podcasthosts aufbauen können, wodurch deren vermittelte Inhalte die Einstellungen und das Verhalten beeinflussen könnten. Diese potenziellen Wirkungen sind insbesondere während gesellschaftlich-politischer Krisenzeiten, wie der COVID-19-Pandemie, bedeutsam. Diese Fallstudie untersucht daher mit einer standardisierten Inhaltsanalyse, wie häufig politische Inhalte in drei populären deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts thematisiert worden sind und wie die COVID-19-Pandemie geframt worden ist. Die Analyse zeigt, dass politische Inhalte bis zu 15 Prozent der Gesprächsinhalte in den untersuchten Unterhaltungspodcasts ausmachen. Zudem wird deutlich, dass in den Podcasts vier thematische Frames zur COVID-19-Pandemie dominierten: die „Diskussion der Maßnahmen“, der „Pragmatische Vorschlag“, der „Kritische Vorwurf“ und die „Lösungsorientierte Empfehlung“. Insgesamt zeigt sich, dass die Podcasthosts vor allem den Umgang der Bevölkerung mit den politischen Maßnahmen zur Pandemiebekämpfung als zentrales Problem identifizierten. Deshalb richteten sie regelmäßig direkte Handlungsempfehlungen an die Bevölkerung, welche sie teilweise mit persönlichen Erfahrungen untermauerten. Damit wird deutlich, dass in den untersuchten Unterhaltungspodcasts die politisch getroffenen Maßnahmen mitgetragen wurden und die Bevölkerung stärker noch als in der journalistischen Berichterstattung in die Pflicht genommen wurde.

#### Abstract

The use of podcasts has grown steadily in recent years, with entertainment podcasts in particular becoming increasingly popular. However, the content of these podcasts remains largely unexplored. This is notable because regular listeners may develop parasocial relationships with podcast hosts, whereby the content conveyed may influence attitudes and behaviour. These potential effects are particularly important in times of socio-political crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. This case study, therefore, uses a standardised content analysis to examine how often political content was addressed in three popular German entertainment podcasts and how the COVID-19 pandemic was framed. The analysis shows that political content accounts for up to 15 percent of the content discussed in the analysed entertainment podcasts. It also reveals that four thematic issues related to the COVID-19 pandemic dominated the podcasts: “Political Discussion”, “Pragmatic Proposal”, “Critical Criticism”, and “Solution-oriented Recommendation”. Overall, data indicate that the podcast hosts identified the population’s handling of the policy measures to combat the pandemic as the dominant problem, and therefore, they regularly addressed recommendations for action directly to the population, some of which they underpinned with personal experiences. This shows that the analysed German entertainment podcasts supported the political measures taken and held the population more accountable than journalistic reporting.



### Schlüsselwörter

Podcast, Unterhaltungspodcasts, Framing, COVID-19, Inhaltsanalyse, Krisenkommunikation, Parasoziale Beziehungen

### Keywords

podcast, entertainment podcasts, framing, COVID-19, content analysis, crisis communication, parasocial relationships

## 1 Einleitung

Podcasts sind weltweit populär (Newman, Fletcher, Robertson, Arguedas & Nielsen, 2024) – auch in Deutschland. Rund 34 Prozent der deutschen Bevölkerung hört zumindest gelegentlich Podcasts, wobei die Podcastnutzung insbesondere bei den unter 30-Jährigen stark ausgeprägt ist (Domenichini, 2022). Gerade Unterhaltungspodcasts wie *Gemischtes Hack*, *Fest & Flauschig* oder *Baywatch Berlin* sind besonders populär (Winkler, Schmidtke & König, 2022). So war *Fest & Flauschig* mit mehreren hunderttausend Hörer\*innen auf Spotify zeitweise der erfolgreichste Podcast weltweit (Eins, 2022). Die COVID-19-Pandemie hat die Popularität von Podcasts weiter befeuert: So gaben 2021 etwa drei Fünftel der Podcasthörer\*innen an, in den letzten zwölf Monaten häufiger Podcasts als zuvor gehört zu haben (Winkler et al., 2022).

Trotz der hohen Reichweiten und abgesehen von qualitativen Fallstudien (Katzenberger, Keil & Wild, 2022b) bleiben die Inhalte von (Unterhaltungs-)Podcasts weitgehend unerforscht. Dies ist insofern bemerkenswert, da regelmäßige Hörer\*innen parasoziale Beziehungen zu den Podcasthosts aufbauen können, wodurch die vermittelten Podcastinhalte die Einstellungen und das Verhalten der Hörer\*innen prägen können (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022). Inwiefern die Inhalte von Unterhaltungspodcasts auch für die politische Kommunikationsforschung beachtenswert sind, ist davon abhängig, wie regelmäßig in Unterhaltungspodcasts politische Themen diskutiert werden.

Neben der Salienz politischer Inhalte in Podcasts ist das Framing dieser Inhalte relevant, um die potenzielle Wirkung auf Podcasthörer\*innen besser abschätzen zu können. Diese Wirkung wird womöglich durch die Integration von persönlichen Erfahrungen durch die Podcasthosts verstärkt (Schlütz,

2020). Konkret bietet sich an, das Framing gesellschaftlich-relevanter Streitfragen näher zu untersuchen. In dieser Studie wird die COVID-19-Pandemie als Untersuchungsgegenstand gewählt, auch weil aufgrund der Kontaktbeschränkungen während der Pandemie parasozialen Beziehungen eine besonders große Bedeutung zugeschrieben worden ist (Jarzyna, 2021). In dieser Studie stehen daher zwei Forschungsfragen im Mittelpunkt:

- (1) *Wie viel wurde in den Jahren 2020 und 2021 in den deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts Gemischtes Hack, Fest & Flauschig und Baywatch Berlin über Politik gesprochen?*
- (2) *Wie wurde die COVID-19-Pandemie in den Jahren 2020 und 2021 in den deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts Gemischtes Hack, Fest & Flauschig und Baywatch Berlin geframt?*

Die Studie ist aus vielerlei Hinsicht relevant. Der Anteil politischer Inhalte in drei reichweitenstarken deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts wird erstmals mit einer standardisierten Inhaltsanalyse vermessen, womit das methodische Vorgehen als Blaupause für ähnlich gelagerte Forschungsvorhaben genutzt werden kann. Zudem wird durch die Studie deutlich, wie die COVID-19-Pandemie in deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts geframt wird. Dies ermöglicht die Identifikation von Gemeinsamkeiten und Unterschieden zwischen populärer Laienkommunikation und journalistischer Berichterstattung, zu der bereits erste Studien existieren (Maurer, Reinemann & Kruschinski, 2022).

Um die Forschungsfragen zu beantworten, werden zunächst Überblicke über die Podcastforschung (Kapitel 2) und das Framing der COVID-19-Pandemie gegeben (Kapitel 3). Beides bildet die Grundlage für die Entwicklung des Codebuchs, das im methodischen Vorgehen näher vorgestellt wird (Kapitel 4). Daraufhin werden die Ergebnisse präsentiert (Kapitel 5) und diskutiert (Kapitel 6).

## 2 Podcastforschung

Podcasts haben sich in den vergangenen Jahren als ein populäres Medium etabliert und gewinnen in der Medienlandschaft stetig an

Bedeutung. Trotz ihrer weiten Verbreitung und ihrer wachsenden Relevanz für gesellschaftliche Diskurse ist die wissenschaftliche Podcastforschung bislang vergleichsweise wenig entwickelt. Im Folgenden werden die bisherigen Erkenntnisse zu Kommunikator\*innen, Inhalten, zur Nutzung sowie zur Rezeption und Wirkung zusammengefasst, wodurch die Ergebnisse der vorliegenden Studie besser eingeordnet werden können.

### 2.1 Kommunikator\*innen der Podcasts

Auf der Ebene der Kommunikator\*innen kann zwischen unabhängigen und professionalisierten, aus Medienhäusern stammenden Podcaster\*innen unterschieden werden. Unabhängige Podcaster\*innen sind Menschen, die in ihrer Freizeit Podcasts erstellen. Dabei handelt es sich sowohl um Privatpersonen als auch um Prominente und Personen des öffentlichen Lebens. Die Vielzahl dieser „Indiepodcasts“ lässt sich mitunter auf die ressourcenarmen Produktionskosten von Podcasts zurückführen. Die Produktion und Verbreitung sind kostengünstig und setzen vergleichsweise wenig technisches Wissen oder Vorkenntnisse voraus (Attig, 2022; Katzerberger, Keil & Wild, 2022a). Dennoch zeigt sich die Entwicklung, dass die Podcasts von professionalisierten Podcaster\*innen die Inhalte von unabhängigen Podcaster\*innen langsam verdrängen (Attig, 2022). Mitunter sind dafür die Plattformen wie Spotify verantwortlich. Zum einen produzieren sie Podcasts exklusiv. Dazu gehören auch *Fest und Flauschig* sowie *Gemischtes Hack*. Zum anderen sind diese Podcasts durch die Algorithmen der Plattformen leichter auffindbar.

Podcasts werden aber auch häufig von etablierten Medienunternehmen oder Produktionsstudios erstellt. So nutzen insbesondere Radiosender eigenständige Podcasts und verwerten bereits gesendete Radiobeiträge und -sendungen weiter (Wild & Wild, 2022). Dies gilt unter anderem für die öffentlich-rechtlichen Radiosender wie Deutschlandfunk, die ihre Nachrichtenbeiträge als Podcasts verbreiten. Besonders hervorzuheben ist auch der Podcast *Das Coronavirus-Update* von NDR Info, der eine große Beliebtheit bei Bürger\*innen erfuhr, die sich über die aktuellen Geschehnisse der Pandemie informieren wollten. In dem Podcast sprach der Virologe Christian Drosten über

den Verlauf der COVID-19-Pandemie. Der Podcast ist eins von vielen Beispielen, wie sich gesellschaftliche und wirtschaftliche Akteur\*innen Podcasts zu eigen machen, sei es zur Wissenschaftskommunikation (Leander, 2020) oder zu Marketingzwecken von Wirtschaftsunternehmen (Schreyer, 2022). Diese Vielzahl an Angeboten illustriert die Breite der Podcastlandschaft in Deutschland.

### 2.2 Inhalte der Podcasts

Die Inhalte von Podcasts wurden bisher meist betrachtet, um die Podcasts entsprechend ihrer Inhalte in Genre- und Format-Kategorien einzuteilen oder um unterschiedliche Rollen von Podcaster\*innen (professionalisiert, journalistisch oder politisch) zu identifizieren. So können inhaltlich fünf gängige Podcastformate unterschieden werden (Frühbrodt & Auerbacher, 2021): One-Man- bzw. One-Woman-Shows, Dialoge, Interviews, Reportagen und Magazine. Darüber hinaus gibt es Hybrid-Formen, wie beispielsweise das Zwiegespräch zwischen zwei Moderator\*innen oder durch vereinzelte Interviews mit Gäst\*innen.

Podcasts aus den Genres Comedy und Satire erfreuen sich großer Beliebtheit bei den Hörer\*innen. Aber auch Podcasts mit politischen Inhalten, Nachrichten, True Crime-Themen oder wissenschaftlichen Themen werden gerne angehört (Domenichini, 2022). In vielen Podcasts setzen sich die Podcaster\*innen inhaltlich mit vielfältigen Themenbereichen, auch mit Nischenthemen, tiefgründig auseinander (Domenichini, 2018, 2022; Frühbrodt & Auerbacher, 2021). So werden Podcasts unter anderem von Medienhäusern genutzt, um Nachrichteninhalte in einem zusätzlichen und asynchronen Medium zu präsentieren. Eine beliebte Form der Informationsaufbereitung mit detailliert recherchierten Beiträgen ist das (journalistische) Storytelling. Dafür eignen sich Podcasts aufgrund ihrer spezifischen Charakteristika wie Subjektivität, Personalisierung, Kontextualisierung und Transparenz (Schlütz, 2020) und setzen auf Prozesshaftigkeit statt Aktualität (Preger, 2020).

Für diese Studie vor allem relevant ist die qualitative Inhaltsanalyse von Ödmark (2021), die untersucht, wie Comedians im Vergleich zu Journalist\*innen in Schweden Nachrichten und politische Themen in Podcasts framen. Sie zeigt, dass das Nachrichtenframing von Comedians wesentlich persönlicher und emotiona-

ler ist als das der Journalist\*innen. Während Comedy-Formate häufiger gesellschaftliche Zusammenhänge thematisieren und politische Ereignisse mit breiteren sozialen Themen verknüpfen, bleibt die journalistische Darstellung eher episodisch und konzentriert sich stärker auf individuelle Ereignisse. Die Comedians fokussieren in ihren Darstellungen zudem häufiger politische Figuren und Prozesse, wobei sie eine breitere Vielfalt an gesellschaftlichen Akteur\*innen einbeziehen, insgesamt aber eher negative Wertungen vornehmen. Im Gegensatz dazu bleibt die traditionelle Nachrichtenberichterstattung eher neutral und fokussiert stärker auf Einzelpersonen.

Standardisierte Inhaltsanalysen, die das politische Framing oder die politischen Inhalte in Unterhaltungspodcasts im Allgemeinen untersuchen, existieren unseres Wissens nach bisher nicht.

### 2.3 Nutzung von Podcasts

Im Gegensatz zu den bereits genannten Forschungsbereichen ist die Podcastnutzung vergleichsweise gut erforscht. Die Podcastnutzung hat in den vergangenen Jahren stark zugenommen und verzeichnet ein dynamisches Wachstum (Domenichini, 2022). Der Reuters Digital News Report zeigt, dass besonders während der Hochphase der COVID-19-Pandemie die Nutzerschaft von Podcasts stark gewachsen ist. Knapp ein Viertel der Online-Nutzer\*innen in Deutschland (24%) hat im Jahr 2020 mindestens einen Podcast pro Monat gehört. Seitdem wächst die Nutzerschaft von Podcasts weiterhin an (2021: 25%, 2022: 29%; 2023: 30% (Behre, Hölig & Möller, 2023; Hölig, Hasebrink & Behre, 2020, 2021; Hölig, Behre & Schulz, 2022)). Knapp 60 Prozent der Nutzer\*innen hört pro Woche bis zu zwei Stunden Podcasts, ein Fünftel bis zu drei Stunden (Winkler et al., 2022). Die Nutzerschaft von Podcasts ist größtenteils unter 40 Jahre alt (Winkler et al., 2022).

In Hinblick auf das Genre erfreuten sich im Jahr 2020 vor allem Unterhaltungspodcasts der größten Beliebtheit (Wieth, Rudeloff & Tellkamp, 2020). Unter den Top 10 der Spotify-Podcastcharts befinden sich beispielsweise fünf Unterhaltungspodcasts. Besonders beliebt sind sogenannte „Lager-Podcasts“, also Podcasts, in dem ein oder mehrere Podcaster\*innen ohne festgelegtes Thema, Kon-

zept oder Struktur im Dialog mit anderen Gesprächspartner\*innen sind. Dies deckt sich mit den Nutzungsmotiven: Podcast-Hörer\*innen nutzen Podcasts vor allem zur Unterhaltung, aber auch zur Information, Entspannung und Weiterbildung (OMR, 2022).

### 2.4 Rezeption und Wirkung von Podcasts

Die Rezeptions- und Wirkungsprozesse der Podcastnutzung sind weitgehend unerforscht. Dabei stellen Podcasts eine Besonderheit auditiver Medien dar. Podcasts gelten als besonders intimes Medium (Behr; 2021, Euritt & Korfmacher, 2020; Eurtitt, 2023; Swiatek, 2028). Durch subjektive Erzählformen und persönliche Offenheit können Hörer\*innen Empathie und Sympathie für die Podcaster\*innen empfinden. Die subjektiven und intimen Erzählperspektiven der Podcaster\*innen greifen die Erfahrungen der Hörer\*innen auf und schaffen eine authentische Verbindung, während die sequenzielle Ausstrahlung der Geschichten deren Chronologie und Zeitlichkeit betont, was zusätzlich zur Glaubwürdigkeit beiträgt (Schlüt, 2020). Eine parasoziale Beziehung zwischen Hörer\*in und Podcaster\*innen kann entstehen (Schlüt & Hedder, 2022).

In einer der wenigen Wirkungsstudien haben Schlüt und Hedder (2022) deutsche Podcast-Hörer\*innen befragt. Sie zeigen, dass parasoziale Beziehungen zu den Podcaster\*innen stärker ausgeprägt sind, je stärker das parasoziale Interaktionsverhalten (z. B. Aufgeschlossenheit, Privatheit) und je unberechenbarer, authentischer und kompetenter die Podcaster\*innen wahrgenommen wurden. Je stärker die parasozialen Beziehungen ausgeprägt waren, desto stärker haben die Hörer\*innen wahrgenommen, dass ihre Einstellungen und Verhaltensweisen von den Podcaster\*innen beeinflusst worden sind. So gaben die Befragten etwa an, dass Podcaster\*innen dazu beigetragen hätten, ihre Einstellungen zu einem Thema zu festigen oder dass sie häufiger mit anderen darüber ins Gespräch kamen. Dies deutet zumindest darauf hin, dass Podcasts ein Persuasionspotenzial haben, insbesondere, wenn die Hörer\*innen eine parasoziale Beziehung zu den Podcaster\*innen aufbauen.

Zusammenfassend erfreuen sich insbesondere Unterhaltungspodcasts in Deutschland wachsender Beliebtheit. Hörer\*innen

können enge parasoziale Beziehung zu den Podcaster\*innen aufbauen. Besonders während der Kontaktbeschränkungen während der COVID-19-Pandemie wurde diesen parasozialen Beziehungen eine besondere Bedeutung unterstellt (Jarzyna, 2021). Aufgrund des potenziellen Wirkungspotenzials von Podcasts ist es insofern erstaunlich, dass die politischen Inhalte von Unterhaltungspodcasts während und außerhalb der COVID-19-Pandemie bisher kaum erforscht worden sind. Diese Forschungslücke greift diese Arbeit auf. Dabei wird ein besonderes Augenmerk daraufgelegt, wie Unterhaltungspodcasts die COVID-19-Pandemie geframt haben. Um eine Einordnung der späteren Ergebnisse zu ermöglichen, wird im Folgenden auf das Framing der Pandemie in der journalistischen Berichterstattung eingegangen.

### 3 Framing der COVID-19-Pandemie

Das Konzept des Framings gilt als zentraler Forschungsbereich der (politischen) Kommunikationsforschung. Framing meint „to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation“ (Entman, 1993, S. 53). Frames heben demnach bestimmte Informationen über einen Sachverhalt, der Gegenstand der Kommunikation ist, hervor und verleihen ihm dadurch eine höhere Saliienz. Unter Saliienz versteht Entman (1993), dass eine Information für das jeweilige Publikum auffälliger, einprägsamer und bedeutungsvoller wird. Eine Erhöhung der Saliienz erhöht somit auch die Wahrscheinlichkeit dafür, dass die Empfänger\*innen die Information wahrnehmen, deren Bedeutung erkennen, sie verarbeiten und speichern (Entman, 1993).

Insbesondere bei gesellschaftlichen Streitfragen ist die Analyse des Framings in journalistischer Berichterstattung ein wesentlicher Forschungszweig der politischen Kommunikationsforschung. Auch das Framing der COVID-19-Pandemie ist bereits in einigen quantitativen und qualitativen Analysen sowohl in Deutschland als auch weltweit untersucht worden. Diese Analysen konzentrieren sich

vor allem auf journalistische Berichterstattung, aber auch Beiträge in sozialen Medien.

Die journalistische Berichterstattung unterschiedlicher Länder zu Beginn der COVID-19-Pandemie haben etwa Ogbodo et al. (2020) und Ebrahim (2022) untersucht. Sie weisen einen alarmistischen Tenor der Berichterstattung nach, wobei etwa die Ausbreitung des Virus, die verursachten Kosten und Einschränkungen der Bewegungsfreiheit hervorgehoben wurden. Auch die vor allem zu Beginn der Pandemie vorherrschende Unsicherheit wurde thematisiert. Eine Analyse von Schweizer Informationsmedien zeigt, dass die Pandemie in Bezug auf verschiedene Bereiche der Gesellschaft wenig fachübergreifend eingeordnet wird (Eisenegger et al. 2020). Die Berichterstattung über die Pandemie änderte sich allerdings auch im Zeitverlauf. Eine qualitative Analyse der Artikel auf der Nachrichtenseite *Der Spiegel* von Kartika und Lestari (2020) zeigt, dass zu Beginn der Pandemie vor allem Bildung und wissenschaftliche Studien zum Virus thematisiert worden sind. Im Verlauf der Pandemie wurden stärker die wirtschaftlichen Schäden in den Vordergrund gestellt. Die damalige deutsche Kanzlerin Angela Merkel betonte dagegen vor allem die Solidarität – insbesondere hob sie die Wichtigkeit der physischen Distanz, die gegenseitige Unterstützung und Hilfe für gefährdete Gruppen hervor (Kneuer & Wallaschek, 2023). Eisenegger et al. (2021) zeigen, dass zu Beginn der Pandemie eher eine Bedrohungslage geschildert wurde, als in späteren Phasen der Pandemie.

In sozialen Medien war die Stimmung aufgeladener und wurde 2020 mit vielen Metaphern unterlegt, wie etwa Wicke und Bolognesi (2020) zeigen. Ihre Analyse englischsprachiger Twitter-Beiträge zeigte, dass die Pandemie häufig mit einer Kriegssituation, einem Sturm, Tsunami oder Monster verglichen wurde. Politisch aktive US-amerikanische Twitter-Nutzer\*innen, die dem republikanischen Lager zugeordnet werden können, beschuldigten zudem häufig China als Verursacher des Virus (Shurafa, Darwish & Zaghouni, 2020).

Für den deutschen Kontext und die vorliegende Analyse von besonderer Bedeutung ist die Studie von Maurer et al. (2022), auch wenn diese nicht das Framing, sondern die Qualität

der Berichterstattung fokussiert. Dafür haben sie mit einer quantitativen Inhaltsanalyse elf deutscher Nachrichtenmedien vom 1. Januar 2020 bis zum 30. April 2021 untersucht. Sie zeigen etwa, dass politische Akteur\*innen, insbesondere Vertreter\*innen der Regierungsparteien CDU/CSU und SPD, am häufigsten in der Berichterstattung vorkommen. Ärzt\*innen, wissenschaftliche Akteur\*innen, Betroffene oder Skeptiker\*innen kommen seltener vor. Die wirtschaftlichen und gesundheitlichen Folgen wurden deutlich häufiger als die sozialen und bildungsbezogenen Folgen angesprochen. Harte, weitreichende Maßnahmen wie Schließungen und Verbote wurden häufig thematisiert, ebenso wie allgemeine Massnahmen, wie die AHA-Regel (AHA steht für „Abstand“, „Hygiene“, „Alltagsmaske“). Die Maßnahmen wurden kritisch verfolgt, wobei die Maßnahmen häufig als zu weit gehend kritisiert wurden. Insgesamt war die Berichterstattung überwiegend sachlich. Inwiefern Unterhaltungspodcasts in Deutschland Gemeinsamkeiten oder Unterschiede zur journalistischen Berichterstattung aufweisen, wird im Folgenden untersucht.

## 4 Methode

### 4.1 Vorgehen und Stichprobenziehung

Zur Beantwortung der Forschungsfragen wurde eine manuelle standardisierte Inhaltsanalyse der Folgen von drei deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts durchgeführt, die in den Jahren 2020 und 2021 veröffentlicht worden sind. Konkret wurden die Podcast-Folgen von *Baywatch Berlin*, *Fest und Flauschig* und *Gemischtes Hack* analysiert. Die Podcasts wurden aufgrund ihrer Popularität in Deutschland ausgewählt. Sie lagen im Jahr 2022 auf Platz fünf, sieben und zehn der deutschen Podcast-Charts auf Spotify in der Kategorie Comedy (Spotify, 2022). Alle drei Podcasts werden auch als „Laber-Podcasts“ (Frühbrodt & Auerbacher, 2021, S. 15) bezeichnet, da die Podcast-Hosts über aktuelle persönliche und gesellschaftlich relevante Themen ohne Skript sprechen und die Unterhaltung im Vordergrund steht. Durch die bewusste Auswahl dieser drei Podcasts sind die Ergebnisse nicht repräsentativ für alle deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts. Es handelt sich um eine Fallstudie.

*Fest und Flauschig* wurde 2016 der weltweit erste „Spotify Exclusive Podcast“. Davon moderierten die beiden Podcast-Hosts Jan Böhmermann und Olli Schulz vier Jahre die RBB-Radiosendung *Sanft und Sorgfältig* (Frank, 2017). 2017 wurde der Podcast mit mehreren hunderttausend Zuhörer\*innen (Milbradt, 2017) als erfolgreichster Podcast des Unternehmens beschrieben (Frank, 2017). *Gemischtes Hack* startete im Jahr 2017, zwei Jahre später wurde er zum Spotify Exclusive (ME-Redaktion, 2019). Der Podcast des Comedians Felix Lobrecht und Comedy-Autors Tommi Schmitt schaffte es als einziger nicht-englischsprachiger Podcast in die weltweite Top Ten von Spotify (Schuetze, 2021). *Baywatch Berlin* wird von Moderator Klaas Heufer-Umlauf, Jakob Lundt und Thomas Schmitt moderiert. Die erste Folge erschien im November 2019. Im Jahr 2020 hatte der Podcast für einige Monate einen Sendeplatz auf ProSieben (ProSieben, 2020).

Der Untersuchungszeitraum vom 1. Januar 2020 bis zum 31. Dezember 2021 wurde so gewählt, dass der Verlauf der Pandemie von den ersten in Deutschland registrierten Fällen, über die Wellen der Pandemie und verschiedenen Maßnahmen sowie die Impfstrategie abgedeckt wird. Aus diesem Zeitraum wurden zufällig 32 Wochen ausgewählt, in denen jeweils die wöchentlich erschienene Hauptfolge der drei ausgewählten Podcasts untersucht wurden.<sup>1</sup>

Als Analyseeinheit wurden Gesprächsabschnitte innerhalb der Podcast-Folgen gewählt, die sich mit politischen Inhalten oder der COVID-19-Pandemie befassten. Bei einem Gesprächsabschnitt handelt es sich um thematisch abgegrenzte dialogische Sprechbeiträge, die jeweils eine Mindestlänge von 30 Sekunden aufweisen. Sobald sich das Thema oder zentrale Akteur\*innen erkennbar änderten, musste ein neuer Gesprächsabschnitt codiert werden, sofern das neue Thema auch einen Politik- oder Pandemie-Bezug aufwies. Fielen zwei Themen unter ein erkennbares gemeinsames Thema, wurde dies als ein Ge-

1 *Fest und Flauschig* sendete zusätzlich zur regulären wöchentlichen Hauptfolge eine kürzere Folge („Boomerlinge“). Zudem haben *Fest und Flauschig* und *Gemischtes Hack* während der Pandemie zusätzliche Sendungen veröffentlicht, die nicht in die Analyse mit einbezogen worden sind.

sprächsabschnitt codiert. Eine Mindestlänge der Gesprächsabschnitte wurde festgelegt, damit nicht kurze anekdotische Politikbezüge in die Codierung mit einfließen.

Für die Identifikation relevanter Gesprächsabschnitte wurde die jeweilige Folge angehört, im 15-Sekunden-Takt vorgespult und Gesprächsabschnitte als relevant codiert, die sich erkennbar mit politischen Inhalten oder der COVID-19-Pandemie befassten. Befasste sich ein Gesprächsabschnitt erkennbar mit politischen Inhalten, wurden 15 Sekunden zurückgespult, um den genauen Anfang des Gesprächsabschnitts zu erfassen. Dann wurde der gesamte Gesprächsabschnitt angehört und die entsprechenden Kategorien codiert.

#### 4.2 Operationalisierung

In formaler Hinsicht wurde neben dem Veröffentlichungsdatum und dem konkreten Podcast (*Baywatch Berlin, Fest und Flauschig* und *Gemischtes Hack*) auch die Dauer der Podcast-Folgen ( $M=01:21:15$  Stunden;  $SD=00:12:14$  Stunden) und die Dauer der relevanten Gesprächsabschnitte ( $M=02:18$  Minuten;  $SD=02:14$  Minuten) codiert. Dadurch kann der Anteil politischer Inhalte an der Gesamtdauer berechnet werden.

Die als relevant identifizierten Gesprächsabschnitte wurden inhaltlich codiert. Ob und welche Politikdimensionen (*polity, policy, oder politics*) im Gesprächsabschnitt angesprochen sind, wurde dichotom erhoben. Dabei wurde sich an dem Codebuch von Haßler, Wurst & Schlosser (2021, S. 43) orientiert. Demnach wurde *polity* codiert, wenn der Fokus auf der politischen Ordnung (Verfassung, Demokratie, Föderalismus), dem Wahlsystem, den Institutionen (Legislative, Exekutive, Judikative) oder der sozialen Ordnung lag. *Policy* wurde codiert, wenn konkrete politische Inhalte im Fokus standen und *politics* wurde codiert, wenn der politische Entscheidungsprozess im Vordergrund stand.

Bezieht sich ein relevanter Gesprächsabschnitt auf die COVID-19-Pandemie, wurden Frame-Elemente nach Entman (1993) codiert. Die Ober- und Unterkategorien der Frame-Elemente wurden auf Basis einer qualitativen Exploration der untersuchten Podcasts und der journalistischen Berichterstattung identifiziert. Eine *Problemdefinition* ist ein von den Podcastern oder im Gespräch zu

Wort kommenden Akteur\*innen benanntes Problem oder eine Herausforderung (Oberkategorien: *Gefahren des Virus, Politische Maßnahmen, Fake News/Verschwörungstheorien, Sonstiges, Keine*). Bei der *Ursachenzuschreibung* wird die tieferliegende Ursache des identifizierten Problems erfasst. Diese Ursache ist eher strukturell bedingt und liegt nicht primär im Fehlverhalten einer Person begründet (Oberkategorien: *Politische Ursachen, Wirtschaftliche Ursachen, Gesellschaftlich-kulturelle Ursachen, Medizinisch-gesundheitliche Ursachen, Sonstige Ursachen, Keine*). Bei der *moralischen Bewertung* wird codiert, wie der verantwortlich gemachte Akteur im Gesprächsabschnitt bewertet wird (*eindeutig/eher negativ, ambivalent, eindeutig/eher positiv, keine*). Eine Handlungsempfehlung wird codiert, wenn eine solche im Gesprächsabschnitt nahegelegt wird (Oberkategorien: *Empfehlungen an Politik, Empfehlungen an Bevölkerung, Empfehlungen an Medien, Sonstige, Keine*). Zusätzlich wurden die Explizitheit der Handlungsempfehlungen (*implizit, explizit*), die verantwortlich gemachten Akteur\*innen und die Adressat\*innen der Handlungsempfehlungen codiert (jeweils mit den Oberkategorien: *Deutsche Politiker\*innen, Politiker\*innen anderer Länder, Wissenschaftler\*innen und wissenschaftliche Institutionen, Ärzt\*innen und Pflegekräfte und Krankenhauspersonal, Mediale Akteur\*innen, Wirtschaftliche Akteur\*innen, Bürger\*innen, Sonstige, Keine*). Zudem wurde dichotom erhoben, ob die Podcaster persönliche Erfahrungen ansprechen.<sup>2</sup>

#### 4.3 Codierung und Intercoder-Reliabilität

Die Codierung wurde von den vier Autorinnen durchgeführt. Zur Überprüfung der Intercoder-Reliabilität des Codebuchs wurden mehrere Pretest-Runden durchgeführt. Zunächst wurde eine Folge, welche nicht in der Stichprobe enthalten war, zufällig ausgewählt und von allen gemeinsam codiert. Somit konnte über Unstimmigkeiten unmittelbar diskutiert werden und nicht eindeutige Stellen im Codebuch geändert werden. In einer zweiten Pretest-Runde wurden neun weitere Folgen, die nicht Teil der Stichprobe waren, zufällig ausgewählt und von allen Codierenden

2 Das gesamte Codebuch wird auf Anfrage bei der Erstautorin zur Verfügung gestellt.

individuell codiert. Die Intracoder-Reliabilität wurde mit Krippendorffs Alpha mit einem Grenzwert von 0,7 berechnet. Lediglich zwei Variablen (Ursache: 0,42 und Adressat\*in der Handlungsempfehlung: 0,63) wiesen Werte von unter 0,7 auf. Die Abweichungen zwischen den Codierenden wurden in den entsprechenden Gesprächsabschnitten aufgedeckt und Verständnisunterschiede wurden gemeinsam diskutiert und eliminiert. Ein weiterer Reliabilitätstest wurde nicht durchgeführt.

#### 4.4 Analytisches Vorgehen

Zur Beantwortung der ersten Forschungsfrage (*Wie viel wurde in den Jahren 2020 und 2021 in deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts über Politik gesprochen?*) wurden alle codierten Gesprächsabschnitte berücksichtigt, die als relevant für die Analyse identifiziert wurden, d. h. die politische Themen behandelten und eine Länge von mindestens 30 Sekunden aufwiesen. Um die zweite Forschungsfrage (*Wie wurde die COVID-19-Pandemie in den Jahren 2020 und 2021 in deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts geframt?*) zu beantworten, werden die einzelnen Frame-Elemente mit einem manuell-dimensionsreduzierenden Verfahren (Matthes & Kohring, 2004) zu Frames zusammengefasst. Konkret wird eine hierarchische, agglomerative Clusteranalyse mit der Ward-Methode durchgeführt. Die Gruppen werden aus Objekten (hier: Gesprächsabschnitten) gebildet, welche die Varianz in den jeweiligen Gruppen so wenig wie möglich ansteigen lassen (Backhaus, Erichson, Gensler, Weiber & Weiber, 2021). Das bedeutet, dass zwischen den Gesprächsabschnitten nach Gemeinsamkeiten in ihren Eigenschaften gesucht wird, um sie so als Einheit mit ähnlichen Mustern zu betrachten. Bei der Durchführung der Clusteranalyse wurden alle acht Variablen, die in Bezug auf die COVID-19-Pandemie erhoben worden sind, als typenbildende Variablen berücksichtigt (siehe Operationalisierung).

## 5 Ergebnisse

### 5.1 Anteil politischer Inhalte in Unterhaltungspodcasts

Insgesamt wurden 96 Podcast-Folgen in den Jahren 2021 und 2022 untersucht, welche eine

Gesamtlänge von 130:00:09 Stunden umfassen. Dabei fallen 33,7 Prozent (43:48:33 Stunden) auf den Podcast *Fest und Flauschig*, 31,8 Prozent (41:27:01 Stunden) auf den Podcast *Gemischtes Hack* und 34,4 Prozent (44:44:35 Stunden) auf den Podcast *Baywatch Berlin*. Während elf der untersuchten Folgen keinerlei politische Inhalte aufweisen, liegt der Anteil relevanter Gesprächsabschnitte in den restlichen 85 Folgen bei etwa 13 Prozent an der Gesamtlänge aller untersuchten Folgen (13:43:25 von 130:00:09 Stunden). Politische Inhalte werden regelmäßig bei *Fest und Flauschig* (13,4%, 05:51:39 Stunden) und *Gemischtes Hack* (14,3%, 05:56:16 Stunden) thematisiert. Bei *Baywatch Berlin* sind politische Bezüge seltener (4,3%, 01:55:30 Stunden).

Insgesamt lassen sich etwa 48 Prozent der relevanten Gesprächsabschnitte mindestens einer Politikdimension *policy*, *polity* und *politics* zuordnen. Wird nach den drei Politikdimensionen *policy*, *polity* und *politics* differenziert, so zeigt sich, dass Bezüge zu *politics* geringfügig häufiger vertreten sind (38,2%) als Bezüge zu *polity* (29,4%) und *policy* (32,4%). Die Politikdimension *politics*, die sich auf politische Prozesse, Auseinandersetzungen und Machtkämpfe bezieht, wird beispielsweise in der Podcastfolge *Fest & Flauschig* („Am Ende ist es immer das Ego“) aufgegriffen: „Aber das Problem ist [...], wenn Bundestagswahl ist im September, ich glaube dann ist den Leuten nach: „Ok, was machen wir jetzt, jetzt reicht's mal langsam. Weg mit den alten Zöpfen, jetzt wird alles durchgemischt.“ (Minute 44:54). Hier wird die Dynamik von Wahlen und der Wunsch nach politischem Wandel thematisiert. Die Dimension *policy*, die sich auf politische Inhalte und Maßnahmen bezieht, wird in *Gemischtes Hack* (#144 Gib mir PH) deutlich: „Sag mal [...], Berlin, Mietendeckel, tschüss: Hast du da ne Meinung zu?“ (Minute 18:30). Hier geht es konkret um eine politische Maßnahme – den Mietendeckel in Berlin – und ihre Auswirkungen. Ein Beispiel für *polity*, welche sich mit den Strukturen und institutionellen Rahmenbedingungen der Politik befasst, findet sich in der Podcastfolge *Baywatch Berlin* (Das Teuerste ist oft das Beste). Dort wird die Nähe zur SPD und der politische Standpunkt des Podcasthosts reflektiert: „A: Du bist ja auch SPD ... nah. Darfst du dann Olaf sagen? B: Was heißt SPD nah? Mir gefällt, was die machen. Ich bin jetzt

kein SPD-Mitglied. A: Ne, das bist du nicht. B: Genau, das denken ja manchmal Leute. Was ich jetzt nicht so schlimm finde. Habe ich jetzt auch kein Problem mit. A: Du findest sie nur besser als andere Parteien. B: Joa. A: Zum Beispiel als die CSU, findest du eher die SPD besser. B: Genau, genau.“ (Minute 05:41). Hier steht die Parteienlandschaft und die strukturelle Verortung politischer Akteur\*innen im Mittelpunkt, was typisch für *polity* ist.

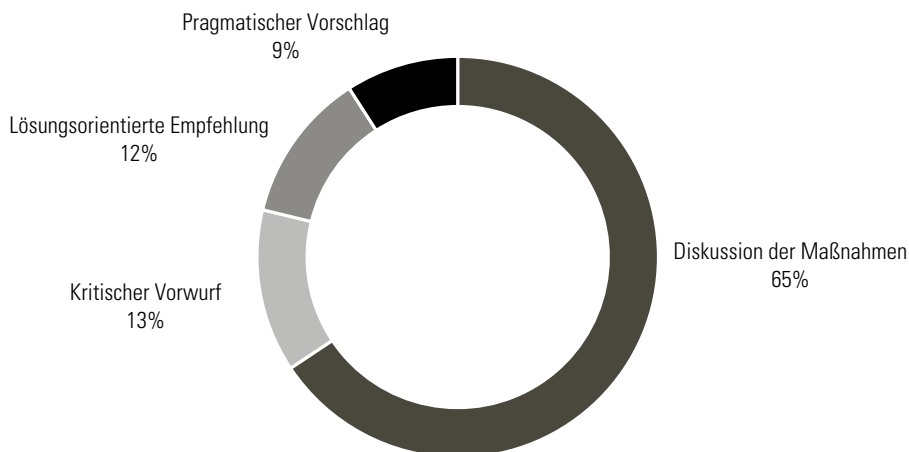
### 5.2 Framing der COVID-19 Pandemie in Unterhaltungspodcasts

Bevor die einzelnen Frame-Elemente zu vier thematischen Frames zusammengefasst werden, werden die einzelnen Frame-Elemente zunächst separat betrachtet (siehe Tabellen 1–4 im Anhang), um anschließend die Besonderheiten der Frames zu verdeutlichen. Im Großteil der Gesprächsabschnitte wird ein Problem definiert (86%). Dabei werden in mehr als der Hälfte aller Gesprächsabschnitte (58%) die politisch getroffenen Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung der Pandemie genannt. Selten wird das Problem in den Virus-Gefahren gesehen, also in der Ausbreitung des Virus, den gesundheitlichen Folgen für Erkrankte oder der Überlastung von Krankenhäusern und fehlender medizinischer Hilfe (10%). In knapp der Hälfte der Fälle (47%) wird das diskutierte Problem mit persönlichen Erfahrungen der Podcaster\*innen untermauert. Häufig werden keine konkreten Ursachen

für die identifizierten Probleme genannt (39,4%). Wenn Ursachen genannt werden, dann sind es häufig allgemeine politische (24,9%), gesellschaftlich-kulturelle (17,4%), medizinische oder gesundheitliche (8,3%) sowie wirtschaftliche Ursachen (3,6%). In der Regel werden keine konkreten Akteur\*innen für die Probleme der Pandemie verantwortlich gemacht (59,8%). Werden verantwortliche Akteur\*innen genannt, so sind dies eher Bürger\*innen (20,9%) als Politiker\*innen (14,6%). Die genannten Verantwortlichen werden meist (eher) negativ (26%) oder aber ambivalent (10%) bewertet. In fast zwei Drittel der Gesprächsabschnitte findet keine Bewertung der verantwortlichen Akteur\*innen statt. Handlungsempfehlungen werden in der Regel nicht gegeben (71%). Handlungsempfehlungen an die Bevölkerung sind häufiger (16,5%) als an die Politik oder andere Akteur\*innen wie beispielsweise Medien oder Wissenschaft (je 6%). Die Podcaster\*innen fordern einen strengeren Pandemieumgang in mehr Gesprächsabschnitten (8%) als einen lockeren Umgang (1%).

Mittels der Ward-Methode lassen sich die Gesprächsabschnitte in vier sich unterscheidende Cluster aufteilen. Der *Pragmatische Vorschlag*, der *Kritische Vorwurf*, die *Diskussion der Maßnahmen* sowie die *Lösungsorientierte Empfehlung* (Abbildung 1). Diese im Folgenden näher beschriebenen Cluster stellen thematische Frames dar, wie über die CO-

Abbildung 1: Framing der COVID-19-Pandemie in den untersuchten Unterhaltungspodcasts



Anmerkungen: Anzahl der geclusterten Gesprächsabschnitte (n=254)

VID-19-Pandemie in den untersuchten Unterhaltungspodcasts diskutiert wurde.

Die *Diskussion der Maßnahmen* ist der größte Cluster ( $n=165$ ) und macht etwa zwei Drittel aller Gesprächsabschnitte aus (65%). Der Cluster zeichnet sich durch eine starke Problematisierung der politisch getroffenen Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung der Pandemie aus. Nur selten werden politische Akteur\*innen verantwortlich gemacht, stattdessen wird die Ursache in dem Virus gesehen. Es erfolgen wenige Bewertungen der Maßnahmen und es werden wenige, jedoch explizite Handlungsempfehlungen an politische Akteur\*innen erteilt.

13 Prozent der Gesprächsabschnitte lassen sich dem *Kritischen Vorwurf* zuordnen, bei dem die verantwortlichen Akteur\*innen besonders negativ bewertet werden. Die Bevölkerung wird als Verursacherin identifiziert und Probleme der COVID-19-Pandemie in der Reaktion der Bevölkerung auf die Maßnahmen sowie in Fake News und Verschwörungstheorien angesehen. Gesellschaftlich-kulturelle Unterschiede innerhalb der Bevölkerung, die sich in der Eigenverantwortung der Bürger\*innen und der Akzeptanz niederschlagen, werden als Ursache wahrgenommen. Trotz der starken Kritik bleiben jedoch konkrete Handlungsempfehlungen zumeist aus.

Zwölf Prozent der Gesprächsabschnitte lassen sich der *Lösungsorientierten Empfehlung* zuordnen. Sie zeichnet sich durch besonders viele Handlungsempfehlungen an die Bevölkerung aus. Als Probleme werden unter anderem die Durchsetzung der Maßnahmen sowie die Reaktion der Bevölkerung auf die Maßnahmen genannt, deren Ursache in der Eigenverantwortung der Bürger\*innen gesehen wird, die somit zu verantwortlichen Akteur\*innen gemacht werden. Als einziges der vier Cluster zeichnet es sich durch besonders viele persönliche Erfahrungen aus und die verantwortlichen Bürger\*innen werden weniger negativ bewertet als bei dem *kritischen Vorwurf*. Außerdem werden viele Handlungsempfehlungen vorgeschlagen.

Beim *Pragmatischen Vorschlag* (9%) werden vor allem die Folgen der politisch getroffenen Maßnahmen als Problem erachtet, insbesondere die gesundheitlichen, wirtschaftlichen und sozialen Folgen dieser Maßnahmen. Jedoch werden diesen weder

spezielle Ursachen zugeschrieben noch werden konkrete Akteur\*innen zur Verantwortung gezogen. Stattdessen werden die Virusgefahren berücksichtigt und als Grundlage der getroffenen Maßnahmen angesehen, welche in der Durchsetzung Probleme aufweisen. Dieser Frame kennzeichnet sich dadurch, dass besonders viele Handlungsempfehlungen an die Bevölkerung gerichtet werden.

Ein wesentlicher Unterschied zwischen den Clustern besteht darin, dass der *Pragmatische Vorschlag* sowie die *Diskussion der Maßnahmen* eher weniger kritisch sind, während der *Kritische Vorwurf* sowie die *Lösungsorientierte Empfehlung* aus Gesprächsabschnitten bestehen, die häufig und explizit Kritik äußern, indem sie besonders viele Probleme, Ursachen und verantwortliche Akteur\*innen thematisieren. Dabei bewertet der *Kritische Vorwurf* die Reaktionen der Bevölkerung besonders negativ. Außerdem äußern der *Kritische Vorwurf* und die *Diskussion der Maßnahmen* wenige Handlungsempfehlungen. Die Handlungsempfehlungen, welche die *Diskussion der Maßnahmen* äußert, kennzeichnen sich dadurch, dass sie sich an Politiker\*innen anstatt an die Bevölkerung richten. Während die Handlungsempfehlungen des *Pragmatischen Vorschlags* explizit geäußert werden, erfolgen die Handlungsempfehlungen in der *Lösungsorientierten Empfehlung* eher implizit. Im Gegensatz zu den anderen Gesprächsgruppen enthält die *Lösungsorientierte Empfehlung* viele persönliche Erfahrungen.

Im Vergleich zur journalistischen Berichterstattung wurde die COVID-19-Pandemie in den untersuchten Unterhaltungspodcasts weniger sachlich und stärker meinungsbehaftet diskutiert (Maurer et al., 2022). Dabei wird im Gegensatz zur Berichterstattung die Rolle der Bürger\*innen stärker betont als die der politischen Akteur\*innen. Dies steht auch im Einklang mit den Ergebnissen von Kneuer und Wallaschek (2023), die vor allem die Bedeutung der Rolle der Bürger\*innen in ihrer Wahrnehmung bei der Umsetzung der politischen Maßnahmen hervorhoben. Insgesamt wurden die von der Politik getroffenen politischen Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung der Pandemie in den untersuchten Podcasts wie auch in der journalistischen Berichterstattung größtenteils gebilligt

Folglich unterscheiden sich die Cluster der Gesprächsabschnitte in ihrem Framing der COVID-19-Pandemie und bilden insgesamt vier thematische Frames, die darstellen, wie in den Unterhaltungspodcasts über die Pandemie berichtet wird. Diese Frames finden sich in allen drei Podcasts und es lassen sich keine signifikanten Unterschiede zwischen den Podcasts feststellen.

## 6 Diskussion und Fazit

Während der COVID-19-Pandemie haben sich Mediennutzungsgewohnheiten in Deutschland und anderen Ländern verändert (Van Aelst et al., 2021). In Deutschland haben Podcasts, insbesondere unterhaltende Podcasts, an Popularität gewonnen, was unter anderem mit den eingeschränkten Kontaktmöglichkeiten begründet wird. Da regelmäßige Hörer\*innen von Podcasts parasoziale Beziehungen zu den Podcasthosts aufbauen können, sind die Inhalte der Podcasts potenziell einflussreich. Diese Arbeit beschäftigt sich daher mit der Rolle von Unterhaltungspodcasts in der politischen Kommunikation, insbesondere im Kontext der COVID-19-Pandemie. In dieser Fallstudie wurde untersucht, wie häufig in den Jahren 2020 und 2021 in deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts über Politik gesprochen wurde und wie die COVID-19-Pandemie geframt worden ist. Für die Untersuchung wurde eine standardisierte Inhaltsanalyse von drei populären und reichweitenstarken deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts durchgeführt: *Baywatch Berlin*, *Fest & Flauschig* und *Gemischtes Hack*. Der Analysezeitraum umfasste die Jahre 2020 und 2021, um politische Themen und deren Darstellung während der COVID-19-Pandemie zu erfassen.

Die Ergebnisse der Untersuchung zeigen, dass in den Jahren 2020 und 2021 in den untersuchten deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts regelmäßig politische Inhalte thematisiert werden und vor allem Corona als dominierendes politisches Thema diskutiert wird. Rund 10,5 Prozent der Inhalte der Podcasts beinhalten politische Themen. Insbesondere die Podcasts *Fest & Flauschig* und *Gemischtes Hack* greifen regelmäßig politische Inhalte auf, während *Baywatch Berlin* dies seltener tut. Etwa die Hälfte der politischen Inhalte

lässt sich den drei Politikdimensionen *policy*, *polity* und *politics* zuordnen. Dabei sind Bezüge zu *politics* etwas häufiger als Bezüge zu *policy* und *polity*. Dies deutet darauf hin, dass die Inhalte sich etwas häufiger mit den politischen Prozessen und involvierten Akteur\*innen befassen. Dabei geht es um politisch-gesellschaftliche Debatten, wie die Diskussion um die Maßnahmen zur Bekämpfung der Pandemie und um das „Wer“ und „Wie“ in diesen Debatten. Etwas seltener geht es um konkrete Inhalte oder die institutionellen Rahmenbedingungen. Während sich Podcasts im Allgemeinen und Unterhaltungspodcasts im Besonderen großer Beliebtheit erfreuen, schließt die vorliegende Studie eine Forschungslücke und zeigt, dass politische Inhalte regelmäßig in drei der reichweitenstärksten deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts thematisiert und diskutiert werden. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass Podcasts nicht nur als Unterhaltungsplattform dienen, sondern auch als relevante Akteur\*innen in der politischen Kommunikation auftreten können. Es ist wahrscheinlich, dass zwischen Hörer\*innen und Podcaster\*innen parasoziale Beziehungen entstehen, womit die von den Podcaster\*innen geäußerten (politischen) Inhalte womöglich die Einstellungen und das Verhalten der Hörer\*innen beeinflussen können (Schlütz & Hedder, 2022). Auch deshalb ist es nicht nur von Interesse, ob und wie häufig Politik in Unterhaltungspodcasts thematisiert wird, sondern auch, wie darüber diskutiert wird.

In dieser Studie wurde das Framing politischer Inhalte in Unterhaltungspodcasts am Beispiel der COVID-19-Pandemie untersucht. Die Untersuchung zeigt, dass die drei untersuchten Unterhaltungspodcasts während der Pandemie häufiger die Reaktionen der Bevölkerung auf die COVID-Maßnahmen diskutierten und kritisierten als die politischen Maßnahmen selbst. Teilweise richteten sie auch Handlungsempfehlungen direkt an die Bevölkerung. Die Unterschiede zwischen den untersuchten Podcasts waren gering.

Es konnten insgesamt vier thematische Frames in den Podcasts identifiziert werden: der *Pragmatische Vorschlag*, die *Lösungsorientierte Empfehlung*, der *Kritische Vorwurf* und die *Diskussion der Maßnahmen*. Die meisten Gesprächsabschnitte (65%) las-

sen sich der *Politischen Diskussion* zuordnen. Hier werden vor allem die politisch getroffenen Maßnahmen und ihre Folgen diskutiert. In den untersuchten Unterhaltungspodcasts wird also, analog zur Gesellschaft, um die Bewertung der COVID-Maßnahmen gerungen. Die anderen Frames machen allerdings deutlich, dass die Podcaster\*innen nicht nur offen diskutieren, sondern auch pragmatische Vorschläge, lösungsorientierte Empfehlungen und kritische Vorwürfe machen. Im Falle des *Pragmatischen Vorschlags* wird die Bevölkerung als zentraler Akteur in die politische Debatte während der Pandemie betont. Dabei werden viele Handlungsempfehlungen an die Bevölkerung gerichtet. Im Falle des Frames der *Lösungsorientierten Empfehlung* werden die Handlungsempfehlungen mit persönlichen Erfahrungen untermauert. Im Gegensatz zur Studie von Ödmark (2021) finden sich in den untersuchten Podcasts aber deutlich weniger persönliche Bezüge. Der *Kritische Vorwurf* ist weniger lösungsorientiert, es werden kaum Handlungsempfehlungen gegeben. Stattdessen wird die Bevölkerung scharf für ihr Verhalten während der Pandemie und im Umgang mit den Maßnahmen kritisiert.

Die Ergebnisse der vorliegenden Fallstudie zeigen keine signifikanten Unterschiede zwischen den drei Podcasts hinsichtlich der identifizierten thematischen Frames. Die eher konstante Kommunikation deutet auf ein möglicherweise höheres Wirkungspotenzial von den untersuchten Unterhaltungspodcasts hin und unterstreicht die Relevanz dieser Medienform für die politische Meinungsbildung, insbesondere in Krisenzeiten wie der Pandemie. Zudem ist zu berücksichtigen, dass es sich bei den drei untersuchten Podcasts um professionalisierte Podcastproduktionen aus Medienhäusern handelt. Die Podcaster\*innen sind Personen des öffentlichen Lebens aus der Unterhaltungsindustrie. Wenn sich diese Kommunikator\*innen politisch äußern, hat das womöglich eine stärkere Wirkung auf die Hörer\*innen, als wenn dies professionelle Journalist\*innen tun, zu denen eine distanziertere Beziehung vorliegt. Um diese These zu prüfen, sind Experimentalstudien nötig.

Die vorliegenden Ergebnisse liefern wertvolle Erkenntnisse über das Framing der

COVID-19-Pandemie in drei deutschen Unterhaltungspodcasts und tragen damit zur Erweiterung des bisherigen Forschungsstands bei, der sich vor allem auf journalistische Berichterstattung und soziale Medien konzentriert. Während international (Ebrahim, 2022; Ogbodo et al., 2020) ein alarmistischer Ton dominierte, zeigen die Ergebnisse dieser Studie, dass die untersuchten Unterhaltungspodcasts differenziertere, weniger dramatisierte Perspektiven bieten. Besonders der Fokus auf politische Maßnahmen und die zurückhaltende Zuschreibung von Verantwortlichkeiten in den Podcasts stellen einen Kontrast zur stärker polarisierenden Darstellung in sozialen Medien dar, wie sie etwa Wicke und Bolognesi (2020) für Twitter nachweisen. Die untersuchten Podcasts ähneln damit der deutschen, weitgehend sachlichen, journalistischen Berichterstattung, wodurch nicht zu erwarten ist, dass die Rezeption der untersuchten Podcasts deren Hörer\*innen wesentlich beeinflusst hat.

Trotz der aufschlussreichen Ergebnisse weist die Arbeit einige Limitationen auf. Eine zentrale Einschränkung liegt in der Auswahl der untersuchten Podcasts. Es wurden nur drei Podcasts aus Deutschland mit männlichen Podcasthosts analysiert, was die Generalisierbarkeit der Ergebnisse einschränkt. Zudem wurde nur ein bestimmter Zeitraum während der Pandemie untersucht, was die Generalisierbarkeit der Ergebnisse ebenfalls einschränkt. Zukünftige Studien sollten eine breitere Auswahl an Podcasts über einen längeren Zeitraum analysieren, um die gewonnenen Erkenntnisse zu validieren und zu erweitern. Darüber hinaus hat der Pretest ergeben, dass die Intercoder-Reliabilität einiger weniger Variablen geringer als erhofft ausgefallen ist. Die Unstimmigkeiten bei der Codierung sind aber im Team besprochen und ausgeräumt worden.

Bisher gibt es uns keine bekannte Referenzstudie, in denen Podcastinhalte standardisiert analysiert worden sind. Das in dieser Fallstudie vorgeschlagene Vorgehen sollte mit dem Ziel verfeinert werden, ein reliables und valides Vorgehen zur Analyse der Podcastinhalte zu entwickeln. Dies würde nicht nur die Vergleichbarkeit der Studien verbessern, sondern auch die Tiefe und Aussagekraft der Ergebnisse erhöhen. Insbesondere im

Vorfeld politischer Wahlen sollten die (politischen) Inhalte und Wirkungen von Unterhaltungspodcasts näher analysiert werden. Dies würde zu einem umfassenderen Verständnis der Bedeutung von Podcasts für die politische Meinungsbildung führen.

Zusammenfassend lässt sich festhalten, dass Unterhaltungspodcasts als besonderes Medium für die Rezeption politischer Inhalte anerkannt werden müssen. Während traditionelle Medien häufig im Fokus der politischen Kommunikationsforschung stehen, leistet diese Arbeit einen wertvollen Beitrag zur Untersuchung alternativer und populärer Medienformate wie Podcasts. Diese haben in den letzten Jahren einen starken Zuwachs an Hörer\*innen erfahren und dienen gleichzeitig, im Gegensatz zu klassischen Nachrichten-Podcasts, nicht primär der Informationsvermittlung politischer Themen. Dennoch werden auch in Unterhaltungspodcasts politische Inhalte thematisiert und über diese diskutiert. Podcaster\*innen nutzen sie als Medium, um über gesellschaftlich und politisch dominierende Themen zu sprechen und ohne journalistischen Anspruch einen Beitrag zum Diskurs zu leisten. Dabei verfügen sie über ein besonderes Persuasionspotenzial. Die weitere Erforschung politischer Inhalte in einem nicht politisch dominierten Medium wie Unterhaltungspodcasts ist von besonderer wissenschaftlicher und gesellschaftlicher Relevanz.

## Interessenkonflikte

Die Autor\*innen erklären, dass keine Interessenkonflikte vorliegen.

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## From ‘War Hero’ to ‘Peace Hero’? The Bundeswehr’s portrayal of German soldiers on the peacekeeping mission MINUSMA on Facebook

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### Abstract

Military operations are a sensitive political issue, particularly in Germany, where a cautious attitude toward the use of armed forces prevails due to the country’s historical legacy after World War II. As a result, the Ministry of Defense must justify its involvement in military operations to the German public. In this context, social media has become a common tool that plays a role in legitimizing military actions. Previous research has shown that different forms of heroism can contribute to the legitimation of military interventions. This paper examines the Bundeswehr’s presence on Facebook to explore how German soldiers participating in the peacekeeping mission MINUSMA are portrayed as heroes. Despite the growing relevance of military issues in Europe, there has been little research on how the Bundeswehr communicates. To address this gap, Facebook posts about MINUSMA published by the Bundeswehr were analyzed using a qualitative framing analysis to explore how heroic figures are verbally and visually constructed. The analysis reveals that heroism is a central theme, and that the specific portrayal of heroic figures reflects Germany’s political commitments – namely, to protect civilians, secure peace, and promote freedom from violence. Furthermore, the communication surrounding MINUSMA is designed to bridge the gap between soldiers and civilians.

### Keywords

heroism, Facebook, framing, political communication, military, peacekeeping, multimodality

## 1 Introduction

Military operations are a sensitive topic in public, especially in Germany (Fischer, 2009; Jacobs & Pötzschke, 2021). Since World War II, Germany’s foreign and security policy has been – and still is – reluctant regarding military actions (Gareis, 2021). Overall, the country established an “antimilitarist culture” (Shim & Stengel, 2017, p. 331), and it was the so-called ‘Streitkräfteurteil’ in 1994, which for the first time allowed the Bundeswehr to take part in NATO’s military interventions (Gareis, 2021; Griep & Varwick, 2021). After the court’s decision, the German army participated in NATO’s 1999 air strike in Kosovo. This was debated very controversially within German politics and the public (Enskat & Masala, 2015; Hülz, 2017, pp. 121–122). The same happened when the German government announced to support the American ‘war on terror’ in Afghani-

stan and joined the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). But, in accordance with a new perception of security (which now implied new risks such as economic dependencies and potential effects of crises from elsewhere on one’s own nation), peacekeeping became part of the Bundeswehr’s central tasks (Böckenförde, 2011; Griep & Varwick, 2021). Thus, as of 2013, the Bundeswehr sent soldiers to Mali in order to support France’s efforts to pacify Mali and diminish the presence of Islamic terror groups in West Africa (Kaim, 2022). The German troops mainly took part in the European Union Training Mission Mali (EUTM) and additionally supported the UN’s peacekeeping Mission Multidimensionnelle Intégrée des Nations Unies pour la Stabilisation au Mali (MINUSMA). Both were established due to an increasing political instability and terrorist threat in Mali. After the withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021, MINUS-



MA became the Bundeswehr's largest out-of-area mission. It was terminated in 2023 due to ongoing conflicts between the Malian military regime and the intervening states.

Such peacekeeping missions not only need to be accepted by the *intervened* country (Gareis, 2006) but also by the *intervening* country's civil society (Jacobs & Pötzschke, 2021). In order to create public consent for political decisions such as the use of military forces, political and military communicators make use of media (Theiler, 2009), preferably social media, where they can communicate directly with their audience (Golan & Ben-Ari, 2018). Given the increasing relevance of social media in the past decade – and its role in shaping public perceptions of the military's functions and legitimacy through self-representation (Kuntsman & Stein, 2015, pp. 26–29; Virchow, 2023), they are of high interest for communication research. Despite this relevance, only a few studies on military forces' self-representation on social media platforms have been conducted.<sup>1</sup> Such studies showed that heroic narratives are a permanent feature in military discourses and play a pivotal role in legitimizing military activities (e.g., Åse & Wendt, 2018; Cavender & Prior, 2013; Mann, 2018). Meanwhile, analyses demonstrate that the concept of heroism varies across different historical, social, and cultural contexts (e.g., Schlechtriemen, 2018) and may still partly rely on the stereotypical 'warrior hero' and the use of (military) force – but increasingly focusses on the intention to keep people safe, secure peace and establish order (e.g., Koch, 2021; Shim & Stengel, 2017; Wegner, 2021).

Against this background, this paper investigates the Bundeswehr's representation of MINUSMA on Facebook in order to achieve

1 To name a few exceptions, several studies deal with the social media usage of the Israeli Defense Forces (e.g., Golan & Ben-Ari, 2018; Kuntsman & Stein, 2015), Novăcescu (2021) studied the Facebook presence of the Rumanian Army, Shim & Stengel (2017) analyzed visual representations of the Bundeswehr's participation in ISAF on Facebook, and Meister & Sluneko (2023) analyzed the Bundeswehr's YouTube series "Mali." More research was done on media presentations of modern armies in news (e.g., Chaouali, 2017; DeCilla, 2018; Fischer, 2009; Göler & Reiter, 2023) or popular culture (e.g., Cavender & Prior, 2013).

a better understanding of the German military force's online communication regarding peacekeeping interventions. This is particularly relevant given the controversial nature of such interventions, as several peacekeeping missions – such as those in Kosovo and Afghanistan – have seen limited success, and since 2014, NATO has shifted its focus from the so-called 'responsibility to protect' back to national and alliance defense (Gareis, 2021). Thus, establishing a positive image of military out-of-area missions got even more relevant. Since MINUSMA coincides with the period in which this policy change started, it is a highly interesting case for researchers. Thus, a qualitative, multimodal framing analysis was applied to the 25 posts about MINUSMA published by the Bundeswehr on its official Facebook page. The platform was chosen since, in contrast to TikTok or X, the Bundeswehr used it during the whole mission. The analysis focused on the so-called 'hero-frame,' which was found to appear within German news media (Reinbold, 2023a), and shall answer two central research questions:

- › RQ1: Which multimodal stylistic devices and thematic aspects contribute to framing German soldiers as heroes?
- › RQ2: What kind of heroism is constructed, and to what extent does it meet the ideal of freedom from violence on the one hand and showing strength on the other?

In the following, the paper first outlines the theoretical background concerning the use of mass media to legitimize political and military actions through framing, as well as the military's use of social media platforms. The second part of the section discusses different forms of presenting modern soldiers and introduces core elements of heroism. As the method section shows, these characteristics can serve as indicators for the hero-frame. This section further explains how the framing approach takes into account the multimodal quality of the empirical data. Afterwards, it is shown that the image of a peaceful aid campaign is upheld not only by presenting tasks (like patrolling or securing the area), but also by omitting central issues (like the conflicts that arise regarding MINUSMA). The concluding remarks outline how far this particular

way of framing MINUSMA (e.g., highlighted/omitted aspects, evaluation, stylistic devices) meets central political claims of freedom from violence and the responsibility to protect, and that the posts on Facebook are central for promoting the Bundeswehr and its activities.

## 2 Theoretical backgrounds and state of research

### 2.1 Framing and the use of media for legitimization

Achieving consent about military interventions is of high importance, and yet particularly challenging in Germany due to the public's reluctant attitude towards such. Moreover, in the case of Germany, political decision-makers need to balance two main (but conflicting) principles of German security policy: On the one hand, alliance solidarity within NATO and the UN's doctrine of the "Responsibility to Protect" (R2P) create an expectation to take part in military activities. On the other hand, the freedom of violence – central to both Germany's foreign policy and the UN Charter – implies that military actions should be avoided (Hilz, 2017).

Since it is essential to convince a (democratic) country's citizens of political ideas and military activities (Kutz, 2013, p. 24; Limor & Nossek, 2006), political actors and organizations like the Bundeswehr, which is part of the Ministry of Defense and thus a political institution, need to explain and legitimize their decisions in public. Empirical findings indicate that increased public information about military operations correlates with higher levels of public support (Steinbrecher, 2023). Military forces are not only the *object* of media productions but *producers* (Jacobs, 2019). Thereby, the Bundeswehr uses its own media channels to inform the public, for recruiting (Meister & Sluneko, 2023; Stengel, 2021), and to influence public opinion (Virchow, 2023). With the rise of social media, platforms such as Facebook have been utilized to help close the gap between military institutions and civilian society (Stengel, 2021). This gap is particularly pronounced in Germany, where military operations rarely influence the daily lives of citizens. Missions like MINUSMA appear even more distant, as they occur in faraway

regions and often lie beyond the scope of public awareness. All in all, Facebook is not only used for spreading 'neutral' information but became "[...] a crucial site of legitimating the military and its activities [...]" (Shim & Stengel, 2017, p. 331).

Because media representations spread (preconceived) narratives and visualizations, which contribute to the audience's understanding of current issues (Kutz, 2013), they are commonly used to place preferred interpretations in public. Communicating topics or events in a specific way and thereby influencing the audience's interpretation is called framing (e.g., Brüggemann & Weßler, 2009). It means "to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (Entman, 1993, p. 52). The result of this process are frames, which can be defined as "[...] organizing principles that are socially shared and persistent over time, that work symbolically to meaningfully structure the social world" (Reese, 2007, p. 150). According to Goffman (1977), frames define situations and thus assist the members of a society to apprehend events. Further, they enable communicators to influence the audience's (respectively, the voters') interpretation of a particular issue (e.g., D'Angelo, 2017). Hence, such frames are of major impact when it comes to legitimizing political decisions and activities like military actions (Scheufele, 2005) and can also be used strategically. This utilization of frames, which aims at generating consent, is called strategic framing (Oswald, 2022). It is a common tool of political communication, also within the field of defense policy (Kutz, 2013).

As mentioned, in communicating – and legitimizing – military activities, framing soldiers as heroes plays a pivotal role, as several studies on news media (e.g., Wegner, 2021), political speeches (e.g., Koch, 2021), and popular culture (e.g., Cavender & Prior, 2013) showed. The following section will introduce typical features of heroism and point out which specific kind of heroism dominates nowadays, according to recently published studies.

## 2.2 Presenting soldiers as heroes in the modern media landscape

Even though the military hero seems to lose reputation in modern societies, several kinds of heroes do appear in modern cultures; physicians, firefighters, sportspeople, and celebrities get worshipped as (everyday) heroes.<sup>2</sup> Thus, there still seems to be a yearning for heroic figures (Neuhaus & Wallenborn, 2003; Bröckling, 2020). In general, heroes are socially constructed by means of communication (e.g., Gözl & Feitscher, 2021; Schlechtriemen, 2018) and “ingredients of heroism have changed throughout the past decades” (Mann, 2018, p. 679). Thus, heroism is not consistent but varies in its form of appearance (Cavender & Prior, 2013; Koch, 2021, p. 55). It depends, for example, on current cultural sentiments, societal issues (Piasecki, 2019), and historical contexts (Neuhaus & Wallenborn, 2003). Despite the cultural and historical variance of heroism, researchers emphasize that heroic figures share several attributes: Heroes are *exceptional*, exceeding the ‘normal’, and transcend borders. This comes along with a high degree of *agency*. Moreover, heroes are ready to *sacrifice themselves* for others and/or a higher purpose. Since heroes must be recognized as such, it is essential that they get *honored*. Narratives about heroes mostly implicate *moral affection* (Bröckling, 2015; Schlechtriemen, 2018) and the *existence of an antagonist* (e.g., Bröckling, 2020; Neuhaus & Wallenborn, 2003; Cavender & Prior, 2013).

Such heroic figures are frequently understood as “producers of (morally) legitimized violence”<sup>3</sup> (Piasecki, 2019, p. 289), though violence executed by those is likely to be accepted. As such, heroes can serve as “useful propaganda tools” (Cavender & Prior, 2013, p. 478) and soldiers are often depicted in heroic terms to legitimize military actions (e.g., Golan & Ben-Ari, 2018). Some studies on news coverage reveal that soldiers are represented as military heroes (e.g., Åse & Wendt, 2018; Mann, 2018), but only a few dig deeper into the question of how modern heroic figures are

constructed. Wegner (2021) analyzed Canadian news reports about peacekeeping in Afghanistan and found the trope of ‘the helpful hero’, which “[...] functioned to cast military activities in the war as helpful and therefore politically justifiable” (Wegner, 2021, p. 6). This figure reunites the typical attributes of the warrior (e.g., mental strength, physical fitness, calmness) and those of the peacekeeper as being sensitive, compassionate, and empathic (Wegner, 2021). Koch (2021) analyzes rhetorical constructions of heroism in Germany: He points out that ancient and modern ideas of heroism merge, meaning that the figure of the strong warrior adapts characteristics of the non-violent helper. This leads to a “civilization of the military hero”<sup>4</sup> (Koch, 2021, p. 96), whereby ‘civilization’ is used as an antonym to ‘militarization’. According to that, heroism remains somewhat linked to the traditional warrior image but increasingly emphasizes the soldier’s role as a helper and ally, representing values aligned with civil society. This is reflected in portrayals of soldiers providing medical aid or assisting in reconstruction rather than taking part in combat (Koch, 2021, pp. 94–110).

## 3 Method and design

This study employs qualitative framing analysis to determine whether heroism plays a role, which heroic attributes are relevant in this particular case, and how those are transmitted by words and visuals. The starting point for the analysis is the findings of another research project, which determined the ‘hero-frame’ as one of four media frames in German news coverage about MINUSMA (Reinbold, 2023a). The frame was striking whenever PR material from the Bundeswehr was used and/or military actors were presented in the news articles. The frame was defined by framing and reasoning devices which “function as demonstrable indicators of the frame” (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 91). *Reasoning devices* are the four elements a frame consists of, namely the problem definition, causal interpretation, evaluation, and treatment recommendation (Entman, 1993). The hero-frame raises the *problem* that Mali is

2 Celebrating such professions as well as caring and considerate individuals as heroes was also part of health campaigns during the COVID-pandemic (Reinbold, 2023b, p.44, 76).

3 Own translation from German.

4 Own translation from German.

a dangerous country where civilians suffer, and German soldiers are in danger because of terrorist attacks. *Causal interpretations* are the ongoing political and ethnic conflicts and the challenging environmental conditions in the Sahel. MINUSMA is *evaluated* positively by emphasizing the higher aim of supporting civilians and/or taking care of other soldiers. Sending peacekeepers to Mali and/or extending their capacities to act is suggested as a *treatment recommendation* (Reinbold, 2023a). Moreover, *framing devices* like distinctive metaphors, keywords, symbols, narratives, etc. are part of (and indicators for) the frame (Gamson, 1989). Such stylistic and less argumentative elements are, for example, labeling soldiers as ‘blue helmets’, paying tribute to soldiers, referring to the ‘fight against terrorism’, and highlighting the heroic attributes mentioned above. Overall, “the linkage between the explicit elements of the [...] text and the central framing idea [...] requires some interpretation [...]” (Van Gorp, 2010, p. 90), and the devices are often subliminally transferred. This explains why latent meanings should also be considered when analyzing frames (Löblich, 2014), and though a qualitative analysis was applied.

Further, since the social media posts include verbal, visual, and auditory elements, a multimodal approach was chosen to tailor the framing analysis to the complexity of multimodal representations. In general, the study of multimodal phenomena requires considering all modes equally (Jewitt, 2016; Serafini, 2022), and the specific ways in which visual and textual elements transfer information should be taken into account (Lobinger, 2012; Moernaut et al., 2020). Pictures, on the one hand, rely more on the “viewer’s ability to make intuitive sense of implicit meanings [...]” (Messaris & Abraham, 2003, p. 219) and thus transmit abstract messages implicitly. Meanwhile, due to their analogical quality, they easily portray anything spatial. Further, they are characterized by an affective or associative logic (Müller & Geise, 2015; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Texts, on the other hand, have an argumentative logic and consist, inter alia, of explicit syntactical devices, e.g., prepositions (Messaris & Abraham, 2003). Thus, they are able to convey abstract content, connect sentences in a specific way, and thereby

draw conclusions (Lobinger, 2012; Müller & Geise, 2015). This is why the following analysis not only takes into account the reasoning devices (which, due to their argumentative and structuring logic, mostly rely on verbal signs) but also framing devices. This allows for the reflection of the more subliminal and latent contents transmitted by visuals and texts. Multimodality is not understood as merely *adding* visual and textual messages: The *interaction* between different modes, which “is significant for meaning making” (Jewitt, 2016, p. 70), should thus be considered as well (Geise & Baden, 2015). For this reason, verbal and visual frames are not analyzed as distinct contents. Instead, the multimodal frame is defined as consisting of verbal *and* visual elements (Moernaut et al., 2020).

To analyze the Facebook posts of the Bundeswehr and prove if the hero-frame gets relevant as well as how, in particular, it gets transmitted in this case, it was searched for visual as well as verbal reasoning and framing devices in the data. The relevant devices were examined in detail to determine their specific nature, e.g., which aspects are particularly relevant for the moral evaluation, and which framing devices play a pivotal role in the posts. In total, all 25 posts published by the Bundeswehr between 2013 and 2023, which mainly deal with the MINUSMA mission, were examined, and the examples mentioned in the following section were selected as best exemplifying the relevant aspects.

## 4 Findings

### 4.1 The critical need to selflessly help others: Reasoning devices of the hero-frames

With respect to the four elements of the news media’s hero-frame, the analysis shows that the problem definition, *the security threat* in Mali, is predominantly represented in a subliminal way, for example, when staged injured soldiers are shown or text refers to possibly dangerous situations. One exemplary post includes pictures of soldiers providing medical aid to comrades outside the camp (Bundeswehr, 2020). The protagonists wear battle vests, helmets, and weapons (Figure 2, examples 7 and 8) and, as the teaser text explains,

Figure 1: Pictures of the foreign circumstances in Mali







<p>Example 1</p>	<p>Example 2</p>
	 <p>#Patrouille: Hauptmann Christian und sein Team sind #Objektschützer der #Luftwaffe aus Wittmund. Die reguläre Einsatzvorbereitung dauert...</p>
<p>Tank passing a Malian village (Bundeswehr, 2017)</p>	<p>Patrolling in the Malian wilderness (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 10)</p>
<p>Example 3</p>	<p>Example 4</p>
	 <p>Impressionen Versorgungsfahrt nach Ansonsgo</p>
<p>Sandstorm reaches Camp Castor (Bundeswehr, 2019 July, © Bundeswehr/ Patrik Bransmüller)</p>	<p>Delivering goods to Ansonsgo (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 4)</p>
<p>Example 5</p>	<p>Example 6</p>
	
<p>Soldiers secure the landing of a helicopter (Bundeswehr, 2023 October 4, © Bundeswehr/Markus Schaller)</p>	<p>Vehicle in the Malian desert (Bundeswehr, 2023 October 4, © Bundeswehr/Björn Lenz)</p>

Figure 2: Examples of German soldiers during training exercises and patrols in Mali

Example 7



Soldier practices to administer first aid to his comrade (Bundeswehr, 2020, © Bundeswehr / Meike Reetz)

Example 8



Soldiers practice to recover a wounded comrade (Bundeswehr, 2020, © Bundeswehr / Meike Reetz)

Example 9



German soldier playing with a Malian child (Bundeswehr, 2019 April 3, © Bundeswehr / Robert Habermann)

Example 10



Soldier in conversation with Malian people (Bundeswehr, 2019 April 3, © Bundeswehr / Robert Habermann)

Example 11



#Patrouille: Hauptmann Christian und sein Team sind #Objektschützer der #Luftwaffe aus Wittmund. Die reguläre Einsatzvorbereitung dauert...

Soldier Christian invites the audience to join his patrol (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 10)







Example 12



#Patrouille: Hauptmann Christian und sein Team sind #Objektschützer der #Luftwaffe aus Wittmund. Die reguläre Einsatzvorbereitung dauert...

Unit prepares for a patrol (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 10)

Figure 3: Examples of German soldiers inside Camp Castor

Example 13	Example 14
 <p data-bbox="168 505 619 524"><b>Abzug aus Mali: Sanität   Bundeswehr</b></p>	 <p data-bbox="641 505 1103 524">#Notfallsanitäter Max zeigt euch die Ausstattung eines #NH90 MedEvac (Medical Evacuation) Seine Aufgabe bei #MINUSMA ist es, den Arzt bei der medizinischen...</p>
<p data-bbox="168 542 619 591">Medical officer Ronald welcomes audience at the Lazarette (Bundeswehr, 2023 November 29)</p>	<p data-bbox="641 542 1103 591">Paramedic Max shows his workspace in an NH90 helicopter (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 8)</p>
	
<p data-bbox="168 997 619 1046">Sanitation Inspector Madelein removes poisonous animals (Bundeswehr, 2023 November 16, © Bundeswehr / Jana Neumann)</p>	<p data-bbox="641 997 1103 1046">Poisonous snake in Camp Castor (Bundeswehr, 2023 November 16, © Bundeswehr / Jana Neumann)</p>
 <p data-bbox="168 1397 619 1415"><b>Abzug aus Mali: Rückbau   Bundeswehr</b></p>	 <p data-bbox="641 1397 1103 1415"><b>Abzug aus Mali: Rückbau   Bundeswehr</b></p>
<p data-bbox="168 1434 619 1476">Soldiers, for the last time, raise the flag (Bundeswehr, 2023 November 27)</p>	<p data-bbox="641 1434 1103 1476">Soldiers at a military parade (Bundeswehr, 2023 November 27)</p>

Continuation of Figure 3 on the next page.

Figure 3: Examples of German soldiers inside Camp Castor

Example 19



Mail delivery by bicycle (Bundeswehr, 2019 July,  
© Bundeswehr/Patrik Bransmüller).

are practicing “tactical casualty management”<sup>5</sup> in case of bomb attacks.

While the text reveals that the scenes are staged, the pictures seem authentic because dummy bombs are used, and the soldiers act severely. Thus, the precarious security situation becomes tangible. Owing to the fact that visual impressions usually persist in the viewers’ minds (e.g., Lobinger, 2012), images of soldiers in hazardous situations are likely to overshadow textual disclosures about the staged nature of these scenes. In sum, the post evokes the impression of a dangerous mission. At the same time, the indicated threat gets diminished by referring to the soldiers’ skills. Another post informs in a rational manner about the mission’s goals as well as the Bundeswehr’s progress (Bundeswehr, 2023 October 4). It refers to the security threat in two ways: First, it declares the mission as one of the most dangerous the Bundeswehr has ever taken part in. Second, the military equipment gets mentioned, for example, the “Fennek, armored scout vehicles” and drones that “were transferred to Mali”<sup>6</sup>. The equipment also gets visualized: One picture shows four soldiers wearing helmets and battle vests (Figure 1, example 5), and the one on the left holds his gun ready to use. All are kneeling on the sandy ground and are taking position to cover a helicopter’s start or landing. The required equipment and security measures sug-

gest a dangerous environment and thus point out a fragile security situation in Mali. On the other hand, the ongoing conflicts within the country or attacks are not a central issue in the posts and are seldom made explicit. Overall, the security threat for soldiers is not explicitly mentioned but subliminally addressed by referring to the security measures necessary.

Regarding the causal interpretation, the posts mostly refer to the *precarious conditions within the villages, sandstorms, heat, and foreign animals*. Visuals show dusty roads, foreign landscapes, and rural areas. Especially posts about patrolling highlight these circumstances. Of course, when filming the soldiers at work in Mali, producers cannot avoid presenting the landscapes. But in several cases, the surroundings are consciously highlighted: A video about soldier Christian’s patrol (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 10) includes a sequence of 20 seconds (which makes at least a quarter of the whole clip) where the area gets filmed with an on-board camera (Figure 1, example 2). Equally, a clip about soldier Jessica mainly portrays the area her tank drives through (Bundeswehr, 2017). It is marked by rural stone buildings and a sandy ground (Figure 1, example 1). On the other hand, only two short sequences (00:01–00:02, 00:32–00:35) show Jessica sitting in the tank. Further, the teaser claims, the clip shall “[...] give an impression of the street conditions in northern Mali”<sup>7</sup>, but no information about the mis-

5 Own translation from German.

6 Own translation from German.

7 Own translation from German.

sion's goals, terroristic attacks, or societal contexts is given. Instead of a vocal comment, rhythmic and catchy backing music is used, which likely attracts the viewers' attention. In the same manner, the clip "Impression of the supply trip to Ansonso" shows soldiers loading vehicles and driving through Mali (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 4). Again, the text does not provide much information, the pictures are aligned by rhythmic backing music, and it is mainly the surrounding area that gets depicted (Figure 1, example 4).

Beyond, the foreign weather conditions (sandstorms and heat) are mentioned. Sandstorms are, according to a teaser text, "part of everyday life"<sup>8</sup> in Camp Castor (Bundeswehr, 2019 July) and visually presented (Figure 1, example 3). In another video clip military physician Erik explains how the troop handles the extreme high temperatures in Mali (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 11). He explains in how far the temperatures over 40 degrees Celsius affect and possibly harm the human body, and how he helps his comrades handle this challenge. Further, a clip about sanitation inspector Madelein and her work addresses the exotic wildlife by referring to poisonous animals living in the desert (Bundeswehr, 2023 November 16). The text claims that "one might think attacks and booby traps are the reason why MINUSMA is the most dangerous mission of the Bundeswehr. But, in the African country there are even better hidden dangers"<sup>9</sup>. Pictures show those animals (Figure 3, example 16) and how Madelein is removing them (Figure 3, example 15). Again, the danger is mentioned but immediately diminished by demonstrating the effective security measures.

This contributes to a positive evaluation. The positive impression gets mainly predisposed by *highlighting activities that are not attached to violence*, like conducting talks or medical services. If weapons are shown, like in the posts about patrolling and securing the helicopters landing (Figure 1, example 5) they are not used. Further, most of the clips thematize other fields of action like medical services and convoy operations. Medical officer "Ronald", for example, introduces himself and ex-

plains his tasks (Bundeswehr, 2023 November 29, Figure 3, example 13). Afterwards, he takes the viewers on a tour through the medical surgery and shows the lazarette while explaining the treatment measures, he can offer his comrades. Moreover, the field of medical aid gets stressed by prominently displaying items like a medical cross. This is also the case in the tank ride with Jessica (Bundeswehr, 2017), within a post on the occasion of 10 years presence in Mali (Bundeswehr, 2023 October 4, Figure 1, example 6) or the medical advice given by Erik (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 8).

Other fields of action which draw the attention away from weaponized activities are training dogs, staying watch, or delivering the post by bicycle (Bundeswehr, 2019 July, Figure 3, example 19). This conceals the armed parts of the mission.

Further, the operation as well as the soldiers are framed positively by emphasizing the *higher aim of providing safety for civilians*: Often, symbols presented refer either to their role as 'blue helmet' (e.g., blue barrettes, UN flags; Figure 2, example 9, and Figure 3, example 18). The idea of providing safety for civilians is subliminally thematized by referring to patrols. While some of these posts (e.g., the ones about Jessica and Christian) focus more on the soldiers, their skills, and the challenging circumstances, the post about a patrol in Gao highlights the relationship between German soldiers and Malian civilians (Bundeswehr, 2019 April). The text explains that "soldiers are collecting important information which contribute to the securitization of Mali". They further "immediately get surrounded by local people" and especially "kids are delighted by the presence of the international guard"<sup>10</sup>. The tender backing music enhances this impression of harmony. Several pictures show soldiers that are not fully covered with helmets. They wear battle vests and weapons, but the blue barrettes and the friendly facial expression are striking. This is also due to the color scheme: While the soldiers' equipment and the background are in the same color tone, the blue barrettes contrast with those. Beyond, the soldiers walk next to women and children (00:04–00:12) and though get in contact with civilians: One soldier is giving high

8 Own translation from German.

9 Own translation from German.

10 Own translations from German.

five to a child next to him, both are smiling broadly at each other (Figure 2, example 9). Another one is talking to adults while seated, as indicated by the visible chair back behind him (Figure 2, example 10). By levelling up with the civilians, a proper and respectful relationship is suggested. Further, he has taken off his sunglasses. Wearing them would rather suggest distance and remoteness, while eye-contact – as created in this picture – helps to “[...] overcome distance and boundaries, establish trust and connection [...]” (Shim & Stengel, 2017, p. 336). Thus, the soldier also appears as approachable to the people in Mali, and to the German audience as well. All in all, the human facet gets highlighted, and a positive impression is evoked.

Finally, the treatment ‘recommendation,’ the *military presence* in Mali, is not *suggested* but presented as *out of question*: Possible alternatives or the option to leave the country are not thematized in any of the posts published before finally dismantling the camp. In contrast, the representations emphasize the importance of the mission, for example, when referring to the necessity and success of patrols (see above). Representing the soldiers as the ones providing the help needed in any situation – for the civil society (e.g., patrolling) as well as for their comrades (e.g., medical aid) – evokes the impression of the mission being obligatory or the soldiers’ ‘duty’. Thus, the treatment recommendation is implied subliminally but permanently.

#### 4.2 Exceptional capabilities of each blue-helmet: Framing devices of the hero-frame

Regarding the framing devices, some heroic attributes are striking. The soldiers’ *exceptionality*, for example, is stressed by highlighting the extreme weather and natural conditions they are exposed to. This evokes the impression of the soldiers being able to endure the toughest conditions and remaining capable of acting in difficult circumstances. They appear to be focused, professional, calm, and rational: Sanitation inspector Madelein, for example, appears quite confident when removing the animals (Bundeswehr, 2023 November 16), and Christian and his comrades appear relaxed but severe during their patrol (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 10). Second, their *ca-*

*capacity to act* is visually demonstrated by picturing the soldiers at work and showing the special equipment and weapons deployed in Mali. Sometimes those are highlighted due to close-up shots (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 10, Figure 2, example 12). This applies to patrolling as well as to medical aid. Medical assistant Max, for example, shows the audience the medical equipment on ‘his’ NH90 helicopter (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 8, Figure 3, example 14). Additionally, texts refer to the soldiers’ long and intensive training (e.g., Bundeswehr, 2020; Bundeswehr, 2022 July 10).

Third, some posts are designed to *cause moral affection*. Here, personalization plays a pivotal role. In clips published within the series #EmbeddedCommunity, the soldiers introduce themselves with (nick) names and tell their story to become approachable to the audience. In the very first video of this series, troop leader Peter Küpper welcomes the audience “[...] in Mali, in Gao, in the desert” (Bundeswehr, 2023 July 3). After introducing himself, he explains that “we offer you to join us and our soldiers for the next days to get an impression of what the soldiers accomplish.”<sup>11</sup> Most of the clips published in the series begin with a short personal introduction from a soldier, including an invitation to join him at his work. Christian, for example, welcomes the audience with “Hey there, I’m Captain Christian and today we’re going to patrol around!” (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 10, 00:01–00:03, Figure 2, example 11). In the same manner, medic Max introduces himself and invites the audience to join him to “go the path a patient would go” in his helicopter (Bundeswehr, 2022 July 8). Thus, the audience is directly addressed and integrated into the unit. Further, the focus on a single soldier’s working routine and skills, as well as the face-to-face communication with their audience, contributes to personalization and outlines the heroes’ characteristics, which is central to heroic narratives (Gölz & Feitscher, 2021; Spencer, 2023).

*Honoring*, which is also central to heroic narratives (Bröckling, 2020, pp. 53–59), plays a minor role in the Facebook posts, but later seems to gain relevance. It is, for example, significant in a post from November

11 Own translation from German.

2023 (Bundeswehr, 2023 November 27). The clip shows the dismantling of the camp at the end of the mission. It shows the soldiers preparing the aircraft in a professional manner, while soldier Nana explains what is going on. The teaser mainly refers to the second part of the video clip, a great ceremonial act that will take place. It says, “Here the flags of all NATO allies will be lowered for the last time. Certainly, touching moments for the last standing German soldiers.”<sup>12</sup> This is emphasized by a tragic, carrying melody. Nana explains what happens at the ceremony, and short video sequences from the ceremony are shown. The soldiers wear dress uniforms and light blue barrettes, symbolizing their status as blue-helmets and peacekeepers (Figure 3, example 18). One soldier is handing over a medal. Another one saluting the flag as the sun sets (Figure 3, example 17). While the visual level and the written text address emotions, Nana’s explanations provide information about the proceedings. In sum, the post clearly focuses on the ceremony and thus the honoring of the soldiers.

## 5 Discussion

The multimodal framing analysis of the Bundeswehr’s Facebook posts revealed that the soldiers and their activities are indeed framed as heroic. First, by the four reasoning devices of the hero frame, which all appear in the posts but differ in weighting and explicitness. The problem definition of the *fragile security situation* in Mali is mostly addressed by thematizing the skills and equipment that are necessary to protect civilians and/or comrades. Meanwhile, serious security threats like terrorist attacks or ethnical and political tensions in Mali are omitted. This absence of enemies corresponds with Meister and Sluneco’s (2023) findings regarding the YouTube series “Mali” as well as with Shim & Stengel’s (2017) results of the analysis of visual representations of ISAF on Facebook. They conclude that the absence of enemies likely “[...] makes the whole endeavor seem a lot less dangerous and ugly than it actually is in real life” (Shim & Stengel, 2017, p. 339). Thus,

the problem definition is less relevant and transmitted subliminally. Causal interpretations are *manageable risks like poisoning animals, weather conditions, or poor road conditions*. In a rational and unagitated manner, the posts explain how dangerous the animals are or how challenging the poor infrastructure can be. The effective security measures to handle these risks are part of the *positive evaluation* of the mission. Further, non-combat activities like securing the camp and the surrounding area get highlighted, and pictures of the active use of weapons are absent, just as in the Facebook posts about ISAF (Shim & Stengel, 2017) and in news reports about Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan. There, the soldiers “[...] appeared capable of lethal force but were not shown deploying it” (Wegner, 2021, p. 15), which evokes a positive impression of the soldier as a helper. Further, the higher aim of helping others is addressed by setting a focus on the Bundeswehr providing humanitarian aid to civilians or comrades helping each other in case of emergency. If helping civilians is thematized, soldiers are often depicted with children. Because those are likely perceived as the most vulnerable group of society, such depictions evoke empathy, enhance the impression of helplessness (Bogerts, 2020), and therefore impede the impression of the soldier being the rescuer, the ‘good’, because the more innocent the protected person, the higher the hero’s prestige (Piasecki, 2019). Further, positively connected attributes like the blue barrettes of the so-called ‘blue helmets’, peacekeepers, or symbols of medicines (Staff of Asclepius, red cross) are striking. Overall, the soldiers’ help for their comrades is presented more often than helping civilians. Here, soldiers provide medical help and assistance in emergency situations. Last, even if it is not addressed explicitly, the posts present the mission itself as a treatment recommendation, since *the troops’ presence in Mali* is not questioned in any of the posts and thus seems mandatory.

Second, regarding the framing devices, typical heroic attributes appear in the posts. The soldiers’ *exceptionality* and *capability to act* are emphasized, mainly by visual impressions which show the soldiers acting under harsh conditions and textual references to their skills. Pictures of soldiers working

12 Own translation from German.

well-versed in the field, showing their special equipment, enduring storms and heat, and fulfilling their tasks in a sober manner, evoke the impression of professionalism and calmness. This enhances the idea of the rational, calm, and well-thinking ‘cyborg-soldier’ who is not guided by emotions like fear or the feeling of insecurity (Shim & Stengel, 2017). Meanwhile, the affective wording, the attentiveness to civilians, and the personalized clips, where soldiers chummily introduce themselves and invite the audience to join them, humanize the protagonists, bring them closer to the audience, and contribute to *moral emotions*. Beyond depicting Africa as a ‘bewildered’ and backward continent and the African people as ‘undeveloped’ and weak is quite common in media discourse<sup>13</sup> (e.g., Asante, 2013; Hänsch et al., 2018) and typical for heroic narratives (Spencer, 2023). Finally, relying on such stereotypical depictions and common characteristics of heroism enhances the chance for successful spreading of the Bundeswehr’s message in public, because frames relying on “words and images highly salient in the culture” (Entman, 2004, p. 6) have greater potential of influence and are more noticeable, understandable, and memorable. Yet, some typical elements of heroism are dismissed: Complementary to other forms of modern heroism, the (human) *antagonist* and the use of weapons are becoming less important (Koch, 2021; Shim & Stengel, 2017; Wegner, 2021). Further, honoring the soldiers as outstanding individuals is not explicitly addressed in the beginning, but it seems to become relevant at the end of the mission.

Overall, the study showed that the multimodal representations of MINUSMA on Facebook sticks to the trope of the ‘helpful hero’, a hero whose “[...] warrior capacity [is signaled] through the aesthetic of a combat soldier while simultaneously gesturing that [...] [he] served a helpful purpose” (Wegner, 2021, p. 16). Beyond this, this reflects the broader shift from portraying the hero fighting *against* someone or something (e.g., terrorism) to

him/her fighting *for* someone or something (e.g., human security, civil rights, innocent people) and thus corresponds with the figure of the ‘civilized military hero’ (Koch, 2021, pp. 63–64). Moreover, depicting the Malian people living among poverty and thus vulnerable as well as inferior to the well-equipped soldiers, the image of the soldier as ‘protector’ gets emphasized. All those figures – the helpful hero, the civilized military hero, and the protector – might appear self-evident considering MINUSMA being a peacekeeping mission. But, first, the war on terror narrative was quite prominent in media representations of the Afghanistan mission ISAF (Al Ahmad et al., 2012), where the mandate for the Bundeswehr included tasks that are comparable to those in Mali. Second, the structure and quality of peacekeeping missions changed during the last decade, and armed activities gained relevance (Bonacker & Distler, 2023; Kaim, 2022). Additionally, MINUSMA was linked to a French anti-terror mission in the Sahel region and thus (at least in public debates) claimed as being part of the ‘war on terror’ (Reinbold, 2023a). Further, not only are the terrorists as opponents absent, but also the Malian military regime, although a conflict between the German and Malian officials rose after coups in 2020 and 2021. This conflict lasted on and affected the troops directly when flight permissions were repeatedly revoked in 2022, for example. Apparently, the Bundeswehr did not inform its audience about those conflictual topics.

## 6 Conclusion

The type of heroism conveyed in the posts – which primarily emphasizes agency, exceptionality, and fighting for someone rather than against someone – reflects political efforts to protect civilians and uphold the ideal of freedom from violence. The intention of protecting civilians and preserving peace gets highlighted by focusing on non-combat activities and referring to securitization. Moreover, the portrayal of Mali as an exotic and underdeveloped region indicates a superiority of the First World country Germany and thus, in accordance with the claim to take responsibility for poorer states, insinuates that the

<sup>13</sup> At also in the case of other media representations of the Bundeswehr, where civilians serve as backdrop or ‘extras’ (e.g., Meister & Sluneko, 2023).

German government and the Bundeswehr are ‘forced’ to act.<sup>14</sup> Meanwhile, the lack of pictures of and textual references to (human) enemies or the active use of weapons meets the ideal of freedom of violence, and is in line with the German politicians’ attempt to keep the combative profile of military actions low (Gareis, 2021). Further, concerns about the German soldiers’ security are diminished due to the posts highlighting the troops’ skills and security measures. Additionally, conflicting issues like the political tensions and discrepancies between the Malian government and the Bundeswehr – including specific incidents like refusing flight permissions – are not thematized. Thus, the positive impression of the mission is caused by highlighting positive aspects as well as by omitting the delicate ones. All in all, the way of self-representation is biased, has at least an ideological flavor, and mirrors the core principles of German policy. Thus, it appears to be significant for the political legitimation process; however, the Bundeswehr as a state institution is legally bound to inform the public in a neutral way (Stengel, 2021).

Furthermore, social media is used in a “promotional” way (Massa & Anzera, 2023, p. 366), though to normalize and ‘civilize’ the military forces, due to the focus on the working and living conditions in the camp as well as on routine tasks. Thereby, the soldiers appear rational, level-headed, and unemotional. This “invoke[s] the impression of rational control” (Shim & Stengel, 2017, p. 335) and yet shifts the focus from human aspects to technical ones. In contrast to that, the representations address the recipients’ emotions and emphasize the human side. Therefore, soldiers are pictured together with civilians and appear as helpers. Moreover, the soldiers get in contact with their audience by introducing themselves by name, talking directly to the recipients, and literally inviting them to (virtually) join *their* patrol or visit *their* workspace. This creates proximity and can counteract the impression of the soldiers being cyborg-soldiers. Additionally, entertaining

features, like fancy music, little suspense, or pictures of exotic animals and landscapes, attract the viewers’ attention. All in all, the way in which the posts are designed likely contributes to bridging the gap between the army and civil society.

Undoubtedly, there are limitations to the study. First, the data analyzed here represents only a small part of the public communication of the Bundeswehr, which also uses TikTok, YouTube, and other platforms. Further research could investigate those and additionally prove how far the soldiers are framed as heroes in the context of other topics, like purchasing new equipment, testing weapons, festivals, or recruiting. Various heroic figures might appear, and the elements and tools that construct heroism could differ. Second, other studies on portrayals of military heroes take the aspect of gender into account. At first sight, female protagonists seem to appear quite frequently in the data analyzed here.<sup>15</sup> Studies could investigate how far gender stereotypes are replicated or countered and/or compare the portrayal of female and male soldiers: Do they use the same jargon, take the same tasks, and do they differ regarding heroic attributes like agency? Third, as heroism is shaped by historical and societal change, examining its transformation over time presents an important avenue for future research.

### Conflict of interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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14 Many help organizations also rely on this narrative and therefore picture African countries and/or people as inferior and backward (Baer, 2013; Bogerts, 2020)

15 Even though there is a very limited number of women in the Bundeswehr: In February 2024 only 13 percent of the Bundeswehr’s staff were females (Bundeswehr, 2024).

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## News usage on Instagram: Frequency, motives, evaluation, and the role of political interest

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### Abstract

Instagram is an increasingly important platform for news consumption. While initial research has examined the characteristics and types of news content on Instagram, little is known about its usage and evaluation. This study explores how adults in Switzerland who frequently use Instagram consume news on the platform; how often they encounter news and whether this is intentional or incidental, their motives for (not) following news accounts; their evaluations of Swiss news accounts; and the role of political interest. Findings show that Instagram is mainly used for entertainment; news consumption is mostly incidental. Higher political interest is associated with more news consumption on Instagram, both intentional and incidental. Respondents with moderate political interest prefer entertainment-oriented outlets. Overall, the findings suggest that adapting to Instagram's entertaining nature could help media companies to reach larger audiences and inform them on hard news topics such as politics.

### Keywords

Instagram news usage, political interest, incidental news exposure, digital journalism, social media news, usage motives, survey data

## 1 Introduction

Political news can nowadays be consumed in a variety of formats, from traditional print newspapers or TV programs to digital formats such as podcasts or social media posts. In this multimedia environment, Instagram has become one of the most relevant platforms for news consumption. According to the Reuters Digital News Report 2024, the number of people who use Instagram for news has been steadily growing and is now at 15% for the general population across a consistent sample of countries (UK, USA, Germany, France, Spain, Italy, Denmark, Finland, Japan, Australia, Brazil, and Ireland). Among young adults (18–24 years, all markets), 18% report that Instagram is their primary source for news (Reuters, 2024).

This growing popularity has sparked scholarly interest; researchers have started to investigate the nature and content of news on Instagram (e.g., Hase, Boczek, & Scharkow, 2023; Hendrickx, 2023; Saks & Hopkins, 2024;

Vázquez-Herrero, Direito-Rebollal, & López-García, 2019), journalistic practices (Perreault & Hanusch, 2024), and norms (Sehl, Eder, & Kretzschmar, 2022). In comparison, less is known about how news content is used and evaluated on the platform. Initial studies suggest that Instagram users perceive a wide range of content as “news” on Instagram (Hendrickx, 2024; Swart & Broersma, 2024) and that content of journalistic sources is not perceived as more credible than content of influencers (Zimmermann, Klee, & Kaspar, 2023). Generally, social media users tend to incidentally encounter news on the platforms (Kümpel, 2022). We build on these findings by focusing specifically on Instagram, using data from frequent adult users in Switzerland. Our first research aim is to investigate how often Instagram users are exposed to news content. Second, we examine whether this exposure is primarily intentional or incidental. Third, we seek to understand the motivations behind following—or choosing not to follow—news accounts on Instagram. Finally, we aim to ex-



plore how users evaluate the Instagram content of different news outlets.

Switzerland's media landscape is shaped by its multilingualism, with a few large companies operating across regions and strong, but politically and financially challenged, public service media (Udris & Eisenegger, 2024). A majority of media that are active online (61%, in addition to print or broadcast as well as online pure) are also present on Instagram (Udris, Ryffel, & Vogler, 2023). The largest online news outlet, *20 Minuten*, has even shifted to a social media-first strategy, meaning that news content is first produced for their social media channels and later adapted for the website (Udris & Eisenegger, 2023). However, this strategy could currently be reevaluated in the context of a broader digital transformation following the announced discontinuation of the print edition by the end of 2025 (*20 Minuten*, 2025). In light of such developments in media production and an increasing focus on digital and social media news content, it is highly relevant to study how media users encounter news on social media platforms.

## 2 Instagram: Affordances, usage motives, and news content

Hase et al. (2023) provide a comparative overview of different social media platforms and their affordances. In their typology, Instagram is characterized by moderate algorithmic curation (chronological feed is available), moderate hypertextuality (links to third party content are possible in stories and bios, but not in posts), moderate interactivity (interaction is limited to liking and commenting, and some interaction features, such as polls, in stories), and high visuality (focus on audio-visual content). Due to restricted linking to third-party content, news content on Instagram is usually not just a preview of a news article on a news medium's website but specifically produced and adapted to the platform logic (Saks & Hopkins, 2024; Vázquez-Herrero et al., 2019). Hase et al. (2023, p. 1503) refer to this as "brand-building news" logic, which is most prevalent on Instagram and leads to a more passive consumption of visually centered news content.

As users are an integral part of platform logic (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), their usage

behavior and motives should also be considered. According to the uses and gratification approach, audiences turn to certain media types and content to fulfill specific needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973; Rubin, 1983). General uses and gratifications for social media use are social interaction, information seeking, pass time, entertainment, relaxation, communicatory utility, convenience utility, expression of opinion, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about others (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Similar motives have been found to drive Instagram usage specifically (Kocak, Nasir, & Turker, 2020; Romero Saletti, van den Broucke, & Van Beggelaer, 2022; Sheldon & Bryant, 2016).

Little is, however, known about what motivates news consumption on Instagram. Qualitative insights from young Swiss social media users (20–25-year-olds) illustrate that they mostly use platforms like Instagram for entertainment, and only incidentally encounter news while using the platform (Schwaiger, Vogler, & Eisenegger, 2022). However, the study also shows that social media news content can serve as a starting point to search for additional news on other platforms. And despite the primary use for entertainment, Instagram is the most popular social media platform for news consumption for young adults in Switzerland; among 18–34-year-olds, around a third indicate using it as a news source (Siegen & Schneider, 2024). This may be related to the characteristics of news content on Instagram. A content analysis of Swiss news media shows that their Instagram stories, compared to the news on the website, focus more on soft-news topics and are more emotionalized (Wirz, Zai, Vogler, Urman, & Eisenegger, 2023). Further, they sometimes contain entertaining elements such as narration or interactive features (Wirz & Zai, 2024). News content on Instagram can therefore be considered as infotainment, which has the potential to attract entertainment-oriented users (Jebril, Albæk, & de Vreese, 2013; Prior, 2003).

Still, little is known about how users consume and evaluate journalistic news of specific outlets on Instagram, and whether the entertaining nature successfully attracts new audiences. We therefore pose the following three research questions:

- › RQ1: How do adult Swiss Instagram users consume news content on Instagram?

- › RQ2: What are their motives to (not) follow news accounts on the platform?
- › RQ3: How do they evaluate the news content of different news outlets?

### 3 Incidental news exposure and political interest

The tendency that news content on social media is consumed incidentally does not only apply to young audiences. In general, media users stumble over news content while scrolling through their social media feeds (Kümpel, 2022). Intentional exposure stands in contrast to incidental exposure (Lee & Kim, 2017). As Matthes, Nanz, Stubenvoll, and Heiss (2020, p. 1033) note: “exposure to content is considered intentional if the recipient had the goal to encounter that content”. A stricter perspective only considers news consumption to be intentional if users intentionally search for news content (Dreston & Neubaum, 2023). However, given that social media feeds are to some extent shaped by “personal curation” (Thorson & Wells, 2016, p. 315), following certain accounts (e.g., news media accounts) can be considered as part of an intentional exposure mode (Heiss, Knoll, & Matthes, 2020). By intentionally following news accounts, users can therefore ensure, to a certain extent, that they also see news posts alongside other content.

With the emergence of social media platforms, incidental news exposure has been considered as having the potential to bring people with little political interest into contact with news (e.g., Tewksbury, Weaver, & Maddex, 2001). However, it has been shown that on algorithmically curated platforms, it is still mainly people interested in politics who encounter news (Barnidge, 2023; Thorson, Cotter, Medeiros, & Pak, 2021). Moreover, incidental exposure alone is not sufficient to be informed about current affairs (Kümpel, 2020; Lee & Kim, 2017), as intentional news seeking plays a critical role in knowledge gain (Dreston & Neubaum, 2023). Since news items on social media often contain little information, knowledge gain depends on further engagement with a news topic. Interest in the news topic has been identified as the strongest predictor for further engagement with a news item (and thus potential knowl-

edge gain) on Facebook (Karnowski, Kümpel, Leonhard, & Leiner, 2017; Kümpel, 2019).

Political interest is not only a stable predictor of news consumption (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010) but also influences the diversity and richness of individuals’ news repertoires. Dvir-Gvirsman (2022) found that individuals with higher political interest are more likely to consume news across multiple platforms and actively participate in sharing news on social media. Conversely, those with lower political interest tend to consume less news overall, regardless of the platform. Additionally, individuals with higher levels of political interest are more likely to develop richer political information repertoires that combine both digital and traditional methods of searching for political information (Wolfsfeld, Yarchi, & Samuel-Azran, 2016). Therefore, understanding the role of political interest is crucial for examining news consumption on social media. Given that this is understudied in the specific case of Instagram and each platform has distinct affordances, we formulate the fourth research question as follows:

RQ4: How does political interest influence news usage on Instagram?<sup>1</sup>

### 4 Method

A cross-sectional survey was conducted to gain insights about adult Swiss Instagram users’ news consumption on the platform. The participants were recruited by the market research institute LINK, and the survey took place from June 20 to 23, 2023, via an online questionnaire. Soft quotas for age and gender were aimed for; Men between the ages of 18 and 24 are underrepresented in the sample compared to the basic population of Instagram users in Switzerland at that time (NapoleonCat, 2024). The survey was part of a larger study; after participating in the survey, participants could opt-in to follow a (manipulated) news account for one week and evaluate it thereafter. Results of this field experiment will

1 The current state of research would suggest a positive correlation and it would therefore also have been possible to formulate a hypothesis. However, the present study is descriptive and does not aim to test hypotheses, which is why we refrained from doing so.

be reported in a different publication. The study was approved by the IRB of the University of Fribourg, Faculty of Management, Economics and Social Sciences; all participants gave informed consent before completing the questionnaire.

#### 4.1 Sample

A total of  $N=511$  people living in the German-speaking part of Switzerland who use Instagram several times a week were surveyed. Seventeen respondents were excluded from the final analysis due to indicators of low response quality (e.g., Meade & Craig, 2012). Thirteen respondents exhibited a high Relative Speed Index ( $RSI, >2$ ), suggesting that they may not have attentively completed the questionnaire (Leiner, 2019). Additionally, four more cases showed both a high RSI and low response variance (straightlining). Finally, the sample comprised  $n=494$  participants. The age range in the sample reaches from 18 to 78 years with a mean age of 38 years ( $SD=12.61$ ), and a median age of 36 years. Overall, 222 of the participants are men (44.9%) and 272 are women (55.1%). Educational attainment varies: 1 person (0.2%) has no degree, 18 (3.6%) have vocational education, 176 (35.6%) have completed an apprenticeship, 68 (13.8%) have finished high school, 107 (21.7%) have attended college or a higher professional education institution, and 124 (25.1%) have attained a university degree.

#### 4.2 Measures

##### 4.2.1 General Instagram use

We followed the recommendations by De Vreese & Nijens (2016) to capture different dimensions of media use and to include aids such as smartphone metrics for more reliable measurements.

*Frequency of Instagram use* was measured at the beginning of the survey with an ordinal scale ranging from “never” to “several times a day”. The market research company only recruited individuals from their panel who use Instagram at least weekly; this was confirmed with a screening question that measured Instagram use on a scale from “never” to “multiple times a day”. Participants who did not meet the eligibility criteria were automatically screened out via the initial filter question.

*Time spent on Instagram* was measured in minutes per day. Participants were instructed to look this up in the screen time tracking metrics on their smartphone.

*Engagement with Instagram content* was measured in terms of *likes*, *shares*, *comments*, and *posting*. Each behavior was measured with one item of a 5-point Likert scale from “very seldom” to “very often” with an alternative response option “I never do this”.

*Motivations for Instagram use* were measured based on Rubin (1983), adapted to the Instagram context. Each motivation was measured with one item on a 5-point Likert scale from “does not apply at all” to “fully applies”. The following motivations were considered: relaxation, entertainment, pass time, companionship, social interaction, information, learning, arousal, and escape.

##### 4.2.2 Instagram use for news

We used an adapted version of the list-frequency approach (Andersen et al., 2016) to identify which news sources participants encounter and how they evaluate them. Since we could not find suitable scales to measure evaluations of news accounts on Instagram and motivations for their (non-)use, own items were developed for these constructs.

*Exposure to news on Instagram* was measured on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from “never” to “every time” [when I use Instagram]. Three indicators were considered, each measured with one item: News content from news media I know, news content from news media I don’t know, and news content from bloggers or influencers.

*Exposure to Swiss news accounts* was measured for the 20 most used Swiss news media with an Instagram account. This list was created based on online traffic data from Mediapulse; only news media that publish in German and with a general news focus (i.e., no special interest outlets such as Cash) were considered. These are: *20 Minuten*, *Basler Zeitung*, *Berner Zeitung*, *Blick*, *Blue News*, *Bote der Urschweiz*, *Bz Basel*, *Der Bund*, *Luzerner Zeitung*, *Neue Zürcher Zeitung*, *Solothurner Zeitung*, *SRF News*, *St. Galler Tagblatt*, *Südostschweiz*, *Tages-Anzeiger*, *Watson*. For each of these accounts, participants were asked to indicate if 1) they have seen it on Instagram but don’t follow it, 2) they follow it, or 3) they have never seen it on Instagram. A “don’t know”

option was available. Further, participants could type the names of other news accounts they see on Instagram in a text box.

*Evaluation of Swiss news accounts* was measured for all accounts that a participant had indicated to see on Instagram (whether they follow them or not). For each selected account, participants rated four items on a 5-point Likert scale from “do not agree at all” to “fully agree”. The items were: informative, comprehensible, entertaining, and motivating to seek further information on a topic.

*Motivations to follow a news account* were measured for all participants who follow at least one news account on Instagram, whether it was in the list or not. Five motivations were considered: out of habit, because of a positive evaluation of the account/content, to obtain incidental information, to intentionally find information, and because of the entertaining presentation of news. Each motivation was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from “does not apply at all” to “fully applies”.

*Motivations to not follow a news account* were measured in a similar way for those who indicated not to follow any news account on Instagram. Four motivations were considered: using Instagram only for entertainment/socialization, a lack of awareness of news accounts on Instagram, a dislike of news accounts/content on Instagram, and no interest in news. Each motivation was measured on a 5-point Likert scale from “does not apply at all” to “fully applies”.

#### 4.2.3 Individual differences

*Political interest* was measured with a single item (“How much are you generally interested in politics?”), with a five-point Likert scale reaching from “very little” to “very much”. A comparison of different measurements showed that political interest can reliably be measured as a one-dimensional concept (Prior, 2018). For further analysis, respondents were grouped into “low political interest” (1–2), “moderate political interest” (3), and “high political interest” (4–5). This allowed us to compare different levels of political interest accurately using ordinal data.

*Sociodemographic information* was measured to obtain a sample that matches the user base of Instagram in Switzerland as closely as possible. Age was measured in years; gender

as male, female, or diverse/other; and education with six categories (no completed school, vocational school, apprenticeship, high school, higher professional education, University degree).

## 5 Results

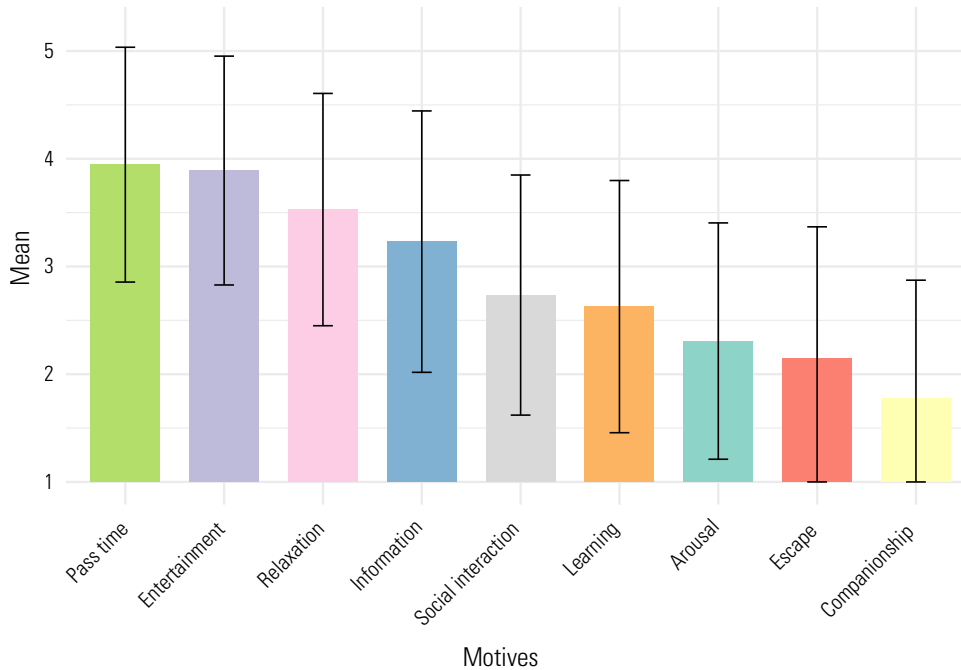
The sample consists of adult frequent Instagram users. Nevertheless, a first analysis of general Instagram use was conducted to get an overview of usage habits. Participants report an average Instagram usage time of  $M=41.41$  minutes per day ( $SD=40.48$ ). Most respondents are generally rather passive Instagram users, with mostly liking ( $M=3.26$ ,  $SD=1.25$ ) and sharing ( $M=2.76$ ,  $SD=1.32$ ), and less frequently creating posts ( $M=2.38$ ,  $SD=1.09$ ) or commenting ( $M=1.88$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ).

Regarding motives, participants mostly indicated using Instagram in the context of enjoyment and stress relief; pastime, entertainment, and relaxation are the most important usage motives. Information is the fourth most important usage motive, which indicates that users are also turning to the platform to stay updated. Interpersonal aspects are less important. *Figure 1* provides an overview of the extent of all usage motives.

### 5.1 News use on Instagram and (non-)use motives

The first research question aims at understanding Swiss Instagram users' news consumption on the platform. A large majority of respondents (91.3%) indicated that they at least occasionally encounter news content on Instagram. However, 43 participants (8.7%) reported not encountering any news on the platform, which suggests that they (intentionally or unintentionally) avoided news content. Instagram users see more news content from familiar news media brands ( $M=3.07$ ,  $SD=1.13$ ) than from unknown organizations ( $M=2.26$ ,  $SD=1.00$ ). Among the respondents, 52 (11.1%) never encounter news from media they are familiar with on Instagram, 101 (21.5%) rarely, 143 (30.4%) sometimes, 156 (33.2%) often, and 42 (8.9%) always. For exposure to content from unfamiliar media, 120 (29.2%) reported to never encounter such news, 193 (46.9%) to rarely do so, 128 (31.1%) sometimes, 39 (9.5%) often, and 14 (3.4%)

Figure 1: Instagram usage motives



Note: Motives were measured using a 5-point Likert scale reaching from 1 (not agreeing at all to use Instagram for the indicated reason) to 5 (fully agreeing). The error bars represent standard deviations and were trimmed at the x-axis if they extended below the minimum possible value of 1 due to many low values.

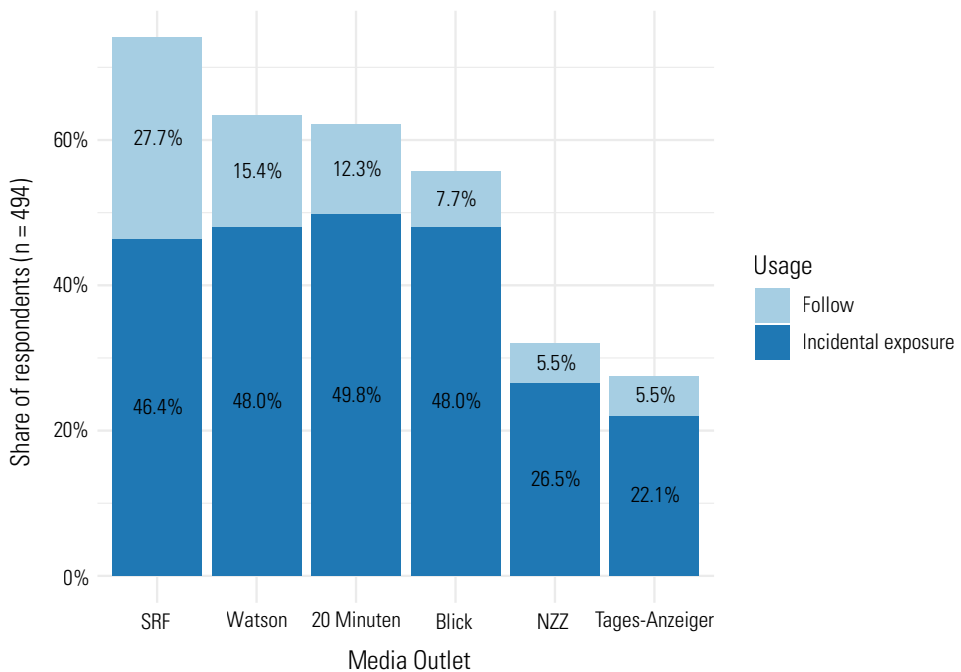
always. Thus, most Instagram users at least occasionally encounter content by news organizations they know, while they only seldomly encounter news content from unknown media organizations.

News media contact on Instagram can be intentional (i.e., following a news account) or incidental (encountering news content without following an account). Looking at intentional exposure, our data shows that respondents follow between 0 and 16 of the media accounts included in the survey ( $M=0.95$ ,  $SD=1.75$ ), with users following about one account on average. Most Instagram users in the sample (260 respondents; 52.6%) do not follow any of the outlets. 86 people (17.4%) reported to follow one account, 45 (9.1%) to follow two, 29 (5.9%) to follow three, 14 (2.8%) to follow four, and 7 (1.4%) to follow five. Only 7 respondents (1.4%) indicated to follow more than five news outlets. When it comes to incidental exposure, the picture looks different. Here, only 81 respondents (16.4%) indicated to not have encountered any of the me-

dia outlets from the list ( $M=3.44$ ,  $SD=3.22$ ). 52 (10.5%) reported to incidentally have seen news content by one of them, 67 (13.6%) by two, 59 (11.9%) by three, 69 (14.0%) by four, 42 (8.5%) by five, 25 (5.1%) by six, 12 (2.4%) by seven, and 13 (2.6%) by eight. 28 participants (5.6%) have seen news content by more than eight accounts. Thus, while about every second Swiss Instagram user follows a news account on Instagram, more than 80% of users occasionally encounter news content by one of the news organizations included in the survey.

But which specific news content do Swiss Instagram users get in contact with on the platform? The six most frequently used media accounts are (in descending order) *SRF News* (*Schweizer Radio und Fernsehen*, public broadcaster), *Watson* (tabloid), *20 Minuten* (tabloid), *Blick* (tabloid), *Neue Zürcher Zeitung* (NZZ; quality newspaper), and *Tages-Anzeiger* (quality newspaper). For the other media accounts, more than 76% of respondents stated that they had never encountered them on Instagram, which is why these media

Figure 2: Follows and incidental exposure of the top six news outlets on Instagram



were not included for the subsequent analyses. Overall, most respondents get into contact with *SRF News*. This is because this account has the highest number of followers (27.7%). Incidental exposure is slightly higher for all three tabloids *20 Minuten* (49.8%), *Watson* (48.0%), and *Blick* (48.0%), compared to *SRF News* (46.4%). Of note, there is a clear exposure gap between the four most used outlets and the two quality newspapers *NZZ*, and *Tages-Anzeiger*. Figure 2 presents the details on the incidental and intentional use of news content of the six most popular media outlets.

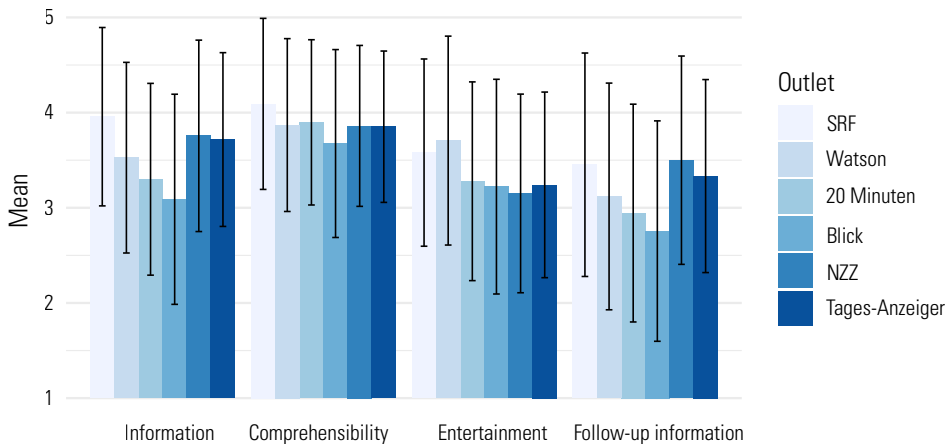
The second research question aims at understanding why Instagram users follow, or respectively do not follow, news accounts on Instagram. Participants' strongest motive to follow at least one news account is incidental information ( $M=3.88$ ,  $SD=1.04$ ). The second strongest motive is because they like the content of the respective account(s) ( $M=3.73$ ,  $SD=0.91$ ). Moreover, Instagram users follow accounts out of habit ( $M=3.50$ ,  $SD=1.23$ ) and because the content is entertaining ( $M=3.48$ ,  $SD=0.98$ ). The least prevalent motive is to find specific information on certain topics ( $M=3.29$ ,  $SD=1.21$ ), but with a mean value

above the scale's midpoint, this motive is also relevant. The strongest reason to not follow any news accounts is that users want to use Instagram for entertainment and not to get informed ( $M=3.89$ ,  $SD=1.02$ ). The second most important reason, although with noticeably less support, is to not like the news content on Instagram ( $M=2.82$ ,  $SD=1.31$ ). This is followed by general disinterest in news content ( $M=2.48$ ,  $SD=1.35$ ), and not knowing about the existence of news content on Instagram ( $M=2.26$ ,  $SD=1.37$ ). Overall, there are many reasons why Instagram users choose to follow a news account, while non-following is primarily motivated by the desire to keep Instagram an entertainment environment.

## 5.2 News evaluation

The third research question revolves around the evaluation of Swiss news accounts on Instagram. Outlets were evaluated based on how informative, how comprehensive, and how entertaining their content is, and to what extent it encourages users to find more information about a given topic. Only the six most frequently used outlets are considered for analysis. The data was restructured to long-for-

Figure 3: Evaluation of the top six news outlets on Instagram



Note: Each evaluation variable was measured using a 5-point Likert scale reaching from 1 (not agreeing at all that the outlet fulfills the given aspect) to 5 (fully agreeing). Error bars represent standard deviations.

mat to compare the outlets. *Figure 3* provides an overview of all variables and outlets.

A one-way ANOVA showed that there are significant differences regarding the evaluation of information,  $F(5, 1319) = 25.81$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .09$ . Overall, *SRF News* ( $M = 3.96$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) is rated as most informative. A post hoc test (Tukey HSD) showed that it is perceived to be significantly more informative ( $p < .001$ ) than all three tabloids; *Watson* ( $M = 3.53$ ,  $SD = 1.00$ ), *20 Minuten* ( $M = 3.30$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), and *Blick* ( $M = 3.09$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ). *SRF News* is not seen significantly more informative than quality newspapers *NZZ* ( $M = 3.76$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), and *Tages-Anzeiger* ( $M = 3.72$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ), though. Both quality newspapers, however, are significantly better evaluated ( $p < .01$ ) than *20 Minuten* and *Blick*. *Watson*, being considered the most informative of all tabloids, differs significantly ( $p < .001$ ) from *Blick*, which overall has the lowest score.

Regarding comprehensibility of the content, a one-way ANOVA also showed significant differences between the media outlets,  $F(5, 1319) = 6.11$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ . With means reaching from 3.68 (*Blick*;  $SD = 0.99$ ) to 4.09 (*SRF News*;  $SD = 0.94$ ) all outlets reach a decent level of comprehensibility. Nevertheless, a post hoc test (Tukey HSD) revealed that *SRF News* is perceived as more comprehensible than *Blick* ( $p < .001$ ) and *Watson* ( $M = 3.87$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ,  $p < .05$ ). There were no significant differences regarding comprehensibility between the other outlets.

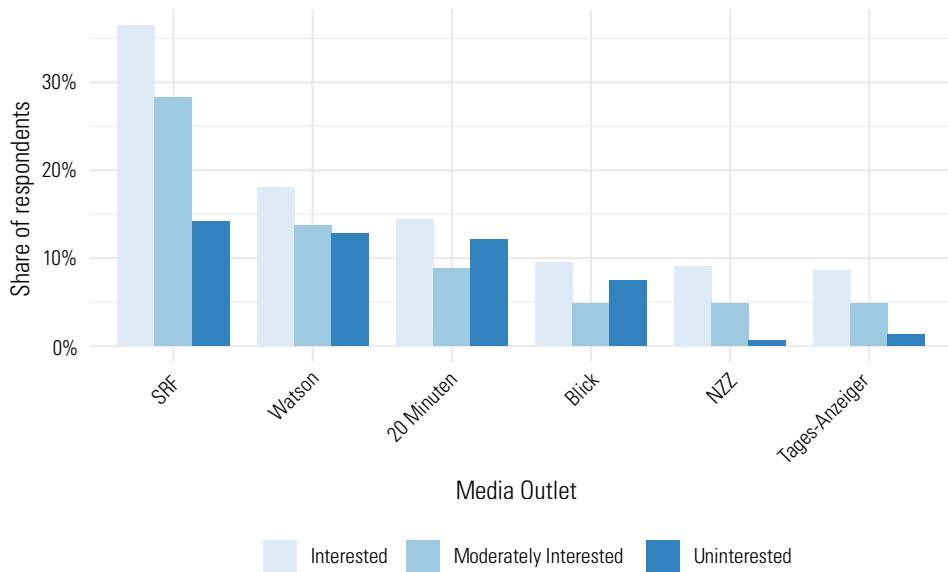
There are also differences regarding entertainment, as a one-way ANOVA showed,  $F(5, 1312) = 10.26$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ . *Watson* is evaluated as the most entertaining ( $M = 3.71$ ,  $SD = 1.10$ ), followed by *SRF News* ( $M = 3.58$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ). A post hoc test (Tukey HSD) showed that there is no significant difference between the two, but both are rated as significantly more entertaining than *20 Minuten* ( $M = 3.28$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ ), *Blick* ( $M = 3.22$ ,  $SD = 1.13$ ), *Tages-Anzeiger* ( $M = 3.24$ ,  $SD = 0.98$ ), and *NZZ* ( $M = 3.15$ ,  $SD = 1.04$ )<sup>2</sup>.

Finally, a one-way ANOVA revealed differences regarding the encouragement to find further information,  $F(5, 1320) = 14.73$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .05$ . *NZZ* ( $M = 3.50$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ), having the highest score, differs significantly from *Blick* ( $M = 2.76$ ,  $SD = 1.16$ ,  $p < .001$ ), *Watson* ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 1.19$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and *20 Minuten* ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 1.14$ ). *SRF News* ( $M = 3.45$ ,  $SD = 1.17$ ) encourages participants significantly more to get further information than *Blick* ( $p < .001$ ), *Watson* ( $p < .01$ ), and *20 Minuten* ( $p < .001$ ). *Tages-Anzeiger* ( $M = 3.33$ ,  $SD = 1.01$ ) differs significantly from *Blick* ( $p < .001$ ), and *20 Minuten* ( $p < .05$ ). Again, *Watson* is the only tabloid that is evaluated better than another tabloid media, i. e., *Blick* ( $p < .01$ ).

Overall, the different approaches that Swiss news media have at presenting news

2 All  $p$  values are  $< .001$ , except for the difference between *SRF News* and *Tages-Anzeiger* ( $p < .05$ ), and *SRF News* and *20 Minuten* ( $p < .01$ ).

Figure 4: Follows of the six most frequently used news outlets grouped by political interest



Note: Percentages refer to the relative number of respondents within each political interest group: Interested ( $n=222$ ), Moderately Interested ( $n=124$ ), and Uninterested ( $n=148$ ). For example, 36.5% of those interested in politics indicated that they follow SRF News on Instagram.

content on Instagram (see Wirz et al., 2023) are reflected in the differential evaluations of the news accounts. Quality news media are generally perceived as more informative and generate a higher interest to follow up on a news topic. Among them, *SRF News* stands out because the content is rated as most comprehensible and highly entertaining.

### 5.3 The role of political interest

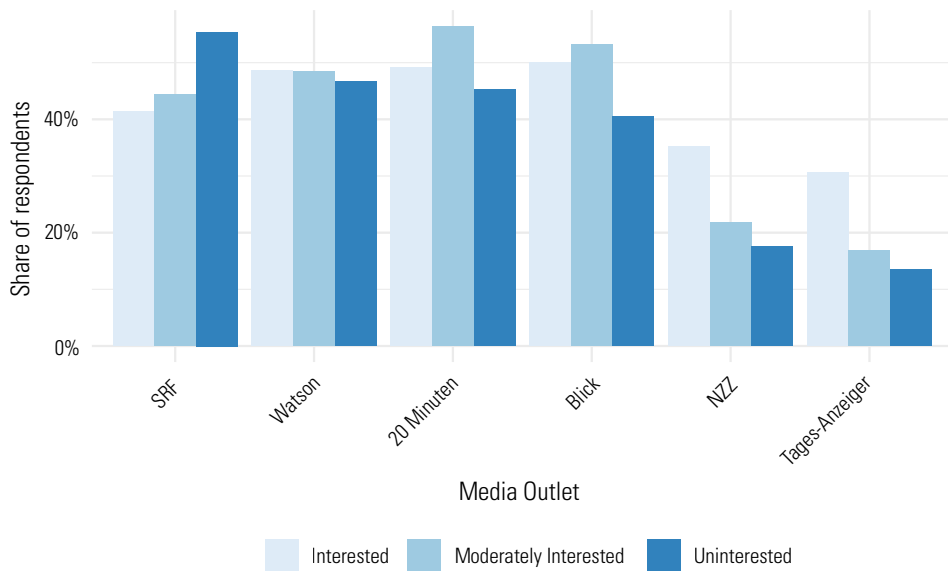
The final research question aims at understanding the role of political interest in Instagram news usage. Different levels of political interest (low, moderate, high) were compared. The group of respondents with little political interest consists of 148 individuals (30.0% of the full sample), with 40 men (27.0%) and 108 women (73.0%), and a mean age of 35.98 ( $SD=11.56$ ). 124 respondents (25.1%) are moderately interested in politics. In this group there are 50 men (40.3%), and 74 women (59.7%) with a mean age of 37.49 ( $SD=12.29$ ). With 222 respondents (44.9%) the group of those who are highly interested in politics is the largest. It consists of 132 men (59.5%) and 90 women (40.5%) with a mean age of 39.64 ( $SD=13.27$ ). There are no significant differences between the groups regarding general Instagram usage and usage motives. This in-

dicates that general platform usage does not depend on political interest.

However, differences were found regarding news consumption on the platform. One-way ANOVAs showed significant differences both for the number of followed accounts,  $F(2, 445)=4.48, p<.05, \eta^2=.02$ , and incidental exposure,  $F(2, 445)=4.13, p<.05, \eta^2=.02$ . Post-hoc tests (Tukey HSD) revealed that those highly interested in politics follow more accounts ( $M=1.19, SD=1.73$ ) than those with low political interest ( $M=0.61, SD=1.59, p<.01$ ). Further, those highly interested in politics also have more incidental contact to news accounts ( $M=3.77, SD=3.31$ ) than respondents with little political interest ( $M=2.79, SD=2.47, p<.05$ ). Those moderately interested in politics do not significantly differ from the other groups regarding deliberate or incidental news exposure.

A detailed look at news exposure to the most frequently used media outlets gives more insights into the news consumption of respondents with different levels of political interest. Regardless of the outlet's overall reach, the proportion of followers who indicate high political interest is higher than that of those with moderate or low interest throughout all media. (see Figure 4 for a full overview). This indicates that the tendency

Figure 5: Incidental exposure to the six most frequently used news outlets grouped by political interest



Note: Percentages refer to the relative number of respondents within each political interest group: Interested ( $n=222$ ), Moderately Interested ( $n=124$ ), and Uninterested ( $n=148$ ). For example, 55.4% of those uninterested in politics indicated that they incidentally see news content by SRF News on Instagram, even though they do not follow.

of users with higher levels of political interest to follow news outlets on Instagram does not depend on the news organization. The proportional share of followers further shows that respondents with moderate political interest follow *SRF News* remarkably more compared to other accounts. Follows for *Watson* are at a similar level for those moderately interested and uninterested in politics. However, uninterested respondents would rather follow the tabloids *20 Minuten* and *Blick* than those who are moderately interested. At the same time, almost none of those uninterested in politics follow quality newspapers *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger*, whereas some of the moderately interested do. Overall, while *SRF News* reaches the largest number of politically uninterested users, the ratio of uninterested users to the total number of users is remarkably higher for the three tabloid media (*Watson*, *20 Minuten*, and *Blick*).

A different picture emerges for incidental exposure. Within each level of political interest, more than 40% indicate having incidentally encountered news content by *SRF News*, *Watson*, *20 Minuten*, and *Blick* (see Figure 5). For *SRF News*, incidental exposure is propor-

tionally the highest for those uninterested in politics. On the other hand, those moderately interested in politics are most frequently incidentally exposed to news content by *20 Minuten* and *Blick*. For quality newspapers *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger*, incidental exposure is still the highest for those with high levels of political interest. Overall, it becomes evident that *SRF News* and all three tabloid media reach users throughout all levels of political interest. Those who are interested in politics tend to follow these outlets, whereas the other groups are reached incidentally. However, respondents with high political interest follow and incidentally encounter quality media more frequently than the other groups.

Motives to follow news accounts on Instagram do not differ significantly across levels of political interest. However, a one-way ANOVA showed significant differences regarding the general disinterest in news,  $F(2, 215) = 14.04$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .12$ . As a post-hoc test (Tukey HSD) revealed, respondents with a low level of political interest ( $M = 3.04$ ,  $SD = 1.33$ ) agree more to not follow any news accounts because of general disinterest in news than moderately interested ( $M = 2.48$ ,

**Table 1:** Means of the evaluation of news content on the Instagram accounts by NZZ and SRF News for different levels of political interest

	Uninterested		Moderately Interested		Highly Interested	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
<i>Neue Zürcher Zeitung (NZZ)</i>	n=20		n=26		n=84	
Information	3.06 <sup>a,b</sup>	1.21	3.85 <sup>a</sup>	0.97	3.88 <sup>b</sup>	0.92
Comprehensibility	3.47	0.90	3.92	0.84	3.93	0.82
Entertainment	2.56 <sup>c</sup>	1.15	3.27	1.04	3.24 <sup>c</sup>	0.99
Encouragement for follow-up information	3.00 <sup>d</sup>	1.12	3.31	1.12	3.68 <sup>d</sup>	1.04
<i>SRF News</i>	n=88		n=80		n=160	
Information	3.69 <sup>e,f</sup>	1.01	4.15 <sup>e</sup>	0.80	4.01 <sup>f</sup>	0.93
Comprehensibility	3.82 <sup>g</sup>	1.03	4.09	0.82	4.24 <sup>g</sup>	0.82
Entertainment	3.39 <sup>h</sup>	1.09	3.80 <sup>h</sup>	0.81	3.57	0.99
Encouragement for follow-up information	2.98 <sup>i,j</sup>	1.26	3.67 <sup>i</sup>	0.90	3.60 <sup>j</sup>	1.18

Note: Group differences on a level of <sup>a,c,d,f,h</sup>  $p < .05$ , <sup>b,e</sup>  $p < .01$ , <sup>g,i,j</sup>  $p < .001$  based on a post-hoc analysis (Tukey HSD).

$SD = 1.26$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and highly interested individuals ( $M = 1.99$ ,  $SD = 1.23$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

Finally, there are also differences regarding the evaluation of the different outlets, as a one-way ANOVA of the mean scores of all evaluation variables showed,  $F(2, 330) = 5.99$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . A post-hoc test (Tukey HSD) found those uninterested in politics to have significantly lower evaluation scores of *SRF News* ( $M = 3.40$ ,  $SD = 0.99$ ), and *NZZ* ( $M = 3.01$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ) than those moderately ( $M_{SRF\ News} = 3.92$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{NZZ} = 3.59$ ,  $SD = 0.83$ ,  $p < .05$ ), and those highly interested in politics ( $M_{SRF\ News} = 3.86$ ,  $SD = 0.82$ ,  $p < .001$ ;  $M_{NZZ} = 3.69$ ,  $SD = 0.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ). There were no significant differences for the other media.

Detailed differences become apparent when looking at the individual evaluation variables. A one-way ANOVA with post-hoc test (Tukey HSD) revealed that those with a moderate interest in politics evaluate the content of *20 Minuten* ( $M = 3.54$ ,  $SD = 0.68$ ) as more informative than those with a strong interest ( $M = 3.10$ ,  $SD = 1.08$ ;  $F(2, 264) = 4.75$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ). One-way ANOVAs showed that for *SRF News* there are differences regarding information,  $F(2, 323) = 5.55$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .03$ ; comprehensibility,  $F(2, 324) = 6.59$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .04$ ; entertainment,  $F(2, 316) = 3.61$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .02$ ; and encouragement to seek follow-up information,  $F(2, 322) = 10.25$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ .

For *NZZ*, there are differences regarding information,  $F(2, 124) = 5.46$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $\eta^2 = .08$ ; entertainment,  $F(2, 123) = 3.56$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ ; and encouragement to seek follow-up information,  $F(2, 127) = 3.76$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $\eta^2 = .06$ . *Table 1* provides an overview of the exact differences between the groups for *SRF News* and *NZZ*. Of note, while most differences occur between those with low and with high interest in politics, those moderately interested in politics find *SRF News* the most entertaining, and more entertaining than those uninterested in politics. This is not the case for the highly interested group. There are no significant differences for *Blick*, *Tages-Anzeiger*, and *Watson*.

## 6 Discussion and conclusion

This study sheds light on how adults in Switzerland who frequently use Instagram consume news on the platform and what role political interest plays in this. The first aim of this study was to understand how and how often Instagram users consume news on the platform (RQ1). 91.3% of respondents indicated that they at least occasionally see news content by familiar or unfamiliar news organizations on Instagram. Thereby, encountering news by familiar news outlets is more likely than by unfamiliar ones. Nearly half of the re-

spondents (47,4%) follow at least one news account. Moreover, 83,6% of respondents reported incidentally encountering at least one of the news accounts included in the survey. Although almost all heavy Instagram users encounter some news content on the platform, exposure to news is therefore rather incidental than intentional. This goes in line with the assumption that online platforms and social media specifically encourage incidental news exposure (Kümpel, 2022; Tewksbury et al., 2001). The high level of news contact underscores the importance that Instagram has gained as a platform for news; while it might still be a niche for news access in the general population (Reuters, 2024), only a very small number of frequent Instagram users do not get in contact with news content on the platform. Compared to other findings on social media news use in Switzerland (e. g., Siegen & Schneider, 2024), our results indicate a rather high exposure rate. One possible explanation for this could be our focus on frequent Instagram users. While this limits the generalizability to the entire population, this approach provides valuable insights to understand the platform audience. Among the most encountered news outlets, *SRF News* stands out due to its high followership (27.7%), while the tabloids *20 Minuten*, *Watson*, and *Blick* have high incidental exposure rates. This might be a result of algorithmic curation; these outlets provide more non- and soft news, i. e., rather entertaining than informative content (Wirz & Zai, 2025). Previous research has shown that human interest is the most important news value on Instagram (Al-Rawi, Al-Musalli, & Fakida, 2021). Future research could investigate in more detail how features of news content on Instagram are related to its popularity on the platform.

Motives to follow at least one news outlet on Instagram, as well as reasons to not follow any (RQ2), give more insight regarding incidental and intentional news exposure. The most important motive to follow a news account is to get incidentally informed. This means that even those who deliberately follow news media mostly do so to occasionally see news content in their feed. This is in line with previous findings on social media news usage motives (Schwaiger et al., 2022). Conversely, the platform seems to be less suitable

for seeking specific information. In that sense, news use on Instagram seems to follow the “news finds me” logic (Gil de Zúñiga, Weeks, & Ardèvol-Abreu, 2017). Users who decide to follow a news account can trust that they stay up to date when scrolling through their feed. Hence, following a news account is a form of incidental use (Kümpel, 2021), even if following implies a certain intention to curate one’s own feed (Thorson & Wells, 2016). Future research could differ between merely incidental news exposure (i. e., stumbling upon news content even though one does not follow), situational incidental exposure (Kümpel, 2021; i. e., incidentally seeing news content as a result of following a news account), and intentional exposure modes (Heiss et al., 2020; e. g., intentionally visiting a news company’s profile or looking for social media news content on certain topics).

The most important reason not to follow any media accounts is that users do not use Instagram to encounter information, but to be entertained. This goes in line with the general motives to use the platform in the first place and general gratifications for social media use (Schwaiger et al., 2022; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Most respondents indicated that they mainly use Instagram for leisure activities, enjoyment, and stress relief, and less so to stay up to date. This indicates that Instagram is first and foremost an entertainment platform. Although these users know that there is news content on Instagram, they do not want to use it. It is also evident that not following news accounts has less to do with not liking the content or a general disinterest in news. Therefore, it can rather be explained with general platform affordances. This finding has important implications considering the discussion about news avoidance and mental health (e. g., Villi et al., 2022; Volk et al., 2024). That the avoidance of news content to keep Instagram a mere entertainment environment does not differ across levels of political interest suggests that some users might deliberately curate Instagram as a news-free space, while following news on other platforms.

According to our data, *SRF News* and *Watson* reach the largest audience on Instagram. The evaluation of the news accounts (RQ3) might provide some explanations for this. Both accounts are perceived as more enter-

taining than the other news outlets. *SRF News* is further perceived as the most informative and comprehensible. This combination of comprehensible information and entertainment, which is also confirmed by a content analysis (Wirz & Zai, 2025), seems to be a success factor. On the one hand, it reflects a good adaptation to the platform logic, and on the other hand, infotainment content is generally considered to be appealing, especially for those with lower interest in politics (Mothes, Knobloch-Westerwick, & Pearson, 2019). Combining information and entertainment thus seems a promising strategy for news outlets that want to reach new audiences on Instagram; *SRF News* demonstrates that this approach is also feasible for quality media.

Political interest (RQ4) plays a significant role in news consumption patterns on Instagram. Those with high political interest follow more news accounts and have greater incidental exposure to news content than those with low political interest. This finding is in line with previous research focusing on more traditional social media platforms (Kümpel, 2020) and news consumption in general (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2017; Ström-bäck & Shehata, 2010). The findings of this study show that on Instagram, most users are exposed to some news content. Nevertheless, almost only those with a strong interest in politics have contact with the quality media *NZZ* and *Tages-Anzeiger*. These outlets have a low incidental reach and are evaluated better by those with high political interest. It seems that these media mainly cater to their loyal readership rather than trying to expand their audience on Instagram. This indicates that those interested in politics further expand their news repertoire through Instagram, as has already been shown for other platforms (Dvir-Gvirzman, 2022; Wolfsfeld et al., 2016). Understanding the role of Instagram news consumption in the overall news repertoire should be considered in future research.

The study has some limitations that need to be addressed. First, news consumption is measured using self-reported data. Relying on self-reported survey data for digital news usage can bring problems with validity, as respondents generally tend to overestimate their digital media use (Parry et al., 2021). Therefore, the results regarding news contact

should be interpreted with caution. Future research should use actual usage data (e.g., logged data) to measure news exposure. However, survey data also allows for assessing motives and the evaluation of specific news outlets, which were important research goals of this study. Additionally, respondents were not asked to indicate exact usage frequencies and media exposure, but whether they followed an outlet, and if not, whether they still had encountered its news content on Instagram. Even though this may reduce bias regarding the validity of news usage, this is a further limitation. The fact that a respondent indicates having encountered some news content by an outlet does not yet allow any conclusions to be drawn about the frequency of use and the type of content they encounter. While some of the incidental exposure might consist of a regular display of highly informative political news, other forms might consist of occasional contact with mere entertainment or soft news topics. This could be specified in future surveys or, again, be clarified using logged data. To assess in detail how different types of news content are perceived and processed, and how political interest interferes with this process, future research should also use experimental methods.

Further, political interest was measured using a single item, indicating the interest in political topics on a five-point Likert scale. While general political interest proves to be reliably measurable as a one-dimensional, self-reported construct (Prior, 2018), the classification into three different levels of political interest (low, moderate, high) and the group comparisons using ANOVAs could be criticized. However, the ordinal data is not ideal for regression analysis; this could lead to type I errors due to a model overfit and violations of regression criteria. ANOVAs with group comparisons based on the item scale, on the other hand, are more accurate, interpretable, and transparent.

Finally, the sample consisted of adult, frequent Instagram users and is not fully representative of the general population of Instagram users in Switzerland. The selection of frequent users reduces memory bias; someone who uses Instagram once a month might not well remember what content they encounter there, and Instagram has less rel-

evance for their overall media diet and informedness.

Overall, this study contributes to the understanding of news consumption on Instagram. It shows that the vast majority of adult, frequent Instagram users in Switzerland encounter news content on the platform. The extent of both intentional and incidental exposure goes in line with the level of political interest. However, adapting to the platform logic by integrating infotainment proves effective in reaching broader audiences, including those less interested in politics. This approach holds potential for media companies to make hard news topics such as politics more appealing to entertainment-oriented users, thereby expanding their reach and impact. This is relevant for general opinion formation in democratic systems. Our study also demonstrates that the main reason not to follow any news account on Instagram is the intention to keep Instagram as a space for entertainment. While it is desirable from a normative point of view to use Instagram as a means to convey information to less politically interested citizens, it is also important to consider that media users should have the possibility to keep certain media environments news-free to foster relaxation and well-being.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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### Data availability

Data and materials described in the article are available at [https://osf.io/3j7d8/?view\\_only=230ff6ad38e44d6b93815e1b9a2cd4ec](https://osf.io/3j7d8/?view_only=230ff6ad38e44d6b93815e1b9a2cd4ec).

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## No local newspapers but WhatsApp? Political information repertoires, local media use and their effects in Switzerland

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### Abstract

In recent years, there has been an increasing focus in research on local media. However, there are still blind spots in this area of research, especially local media use. Considering the increasing variety of information sources due to digitalization, it is no longer sufficient to analyze just individual local information sources. Instead, examining the full range of local information sources becomes essential. Knowing from the news desert research that information on a local level is especially important for a functioning democracy, insights into the use of information sources and local media are therefore of high relevance. This paper presents an analysis of a distinctive data set – a survey in the Swiss canton of Berne in 2022 – that offers insights into local media use, their effects on voter turnout and split-ticket voting, as well as the political information repertoires in Switzerland. Four types of political information repertoires can be derived from all the information sources used: *the informed socializers*, *the traditionalists*, *the wooped ones*, and *the online readers*. Belonging to a particular political information repertoire has an effect on voter turnout and on Swiss split-ticket voting (*panaschieren*), as well as just newspaper use does. The findings from this paper should both lay the groundwork for further research and provide insights for practitioners.

### Keywords

political information, information repertoire, news desert, local media, media use, Switzerland, Berne

## 1 Introduction

In Switzerland, a country with a direct democratic system, there are numerous votes and elections at the municipal, cantonal, and national level (Linder & Wirz, 2014, 145-149). It is of great importance that citizens in Switzerland are adequately informed, and that there is an elevated level of availability of information and news, especially on politics, at the national and at sub-national (cantonal and municipal) levels. Getting politically informed can be achieved through a combination of media content and other sources of information, such as talking to colleagues at work (Marcinkowski et al., 2014, p.435). Local media outlets, which represent a significant source of local information, have often been largely overlooked by researchers for a long time. In the last decade, research interest in local media has increased, especially with the new buzzword *news deserts* (Chmielewski, 2011, pp. 27–29; Abernathy, 2016). The

concept of news deserts has been the subject of investigation at varying levels of analysis, with differing conceptualizations of its defining characteristics and the use of diverse methodological approaches and data sources (e.g., Abernathy, 2016; Mathews & Ali, 2022; Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2013; Vogler et al., 2023; Wang, 2023). However, this research has been focused on the decline of printed newspapers and the decline's effects (e.g., Kübler & Goodman, 2019, for Switzerland). The underlying argument that runs through the news desert research is that local media are essential for a functioning democracy and the dissemination of political information. Various studies have shown that the absence of local media has negative effects on society, for example, on split-ticket voting and voting turnout (e.g., Rubado & Jennings, 2020; Moskowitz, 2021; Montgomery, 2024). While some find negative effects, as fewer voters with less or no local media (e.g., Filla & Johnson, 2010; Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido,



2013; Rubado & Jennings, 2020), a few others find no significant effect for voting itself (Chapp & Aehl, 2021). Although there is a lot of research in this field, there exists criticism of news desert research as a whole: Usher (2023) admits that news desert research is (partly) important but needs to move away from the *void-fixation* and also needs to analyze (still) functioning local media and media markets in order to better understand *who uses* local media and thus local information at all. In response to this criticism, this paper analyses local media use in the Swiss canton of Berne – a region in which local media still exists and is therefore not a news desert. However, in the context of advancing digitalization and the growing number of possible sources of information, it is argued here that merely examining individual local media sources is insufficient for gaining insights into the entire concept of local information gathering. Consequently, this study extends beyond the analysis of individual local media / information sources to analyzing political information repertoires (explanations on this follow in chapter 2).

By adopting the users' perspective, the present study explores a subject that has received comparatively little attention from researchers to date. The overarching question is: What information sources do people in the canton of Berne use to get information on cantonal politics?

The concept of local media is complex and resists a clear-cut definition. There are different approaches as to how *the local* can be defined at all, geographically, politically, or socio-geographically (Burger et al., 2023, pp. 9–10). Based on the definition by Burger et al. (2023, pp. 9–10), local media are defined in this paper as local and sub-national regional media that have an editorial organizational structure, produce clearly identifiable editorial content, whereby this content is primarily produced for a geographical area – municipalities, districts, or cities.

Accordingly, the focus on a specific canton enables the examination of political information repertoires and local media use at the local level with a degree of detail that has not existed yet, especially for Switzerland. Despite the existence of research on national news repertoires and media use in Switzer-

land (e.g., Schwaiger et al., 2020, see also the annual published books “Jahrbuch Qualität der Medien” by the fög – Research Center for the Public Sphere and Society), there is a lack of research examining the political information repertoires and local media use at the local level here. The following section presents the current state of research on media use on a local level and information repertoires.

## 2 Political information repertoires and (local) media as part of it

In the contemporary context of digital transformation, characterized by a multiplication of information sources, a focus on individual channels is no longer a sufficient approach. An alternative perspective is to examine the overall range of local information, which is grouped into what are termed repertoires. First efforts in categorizing and grouping disparate channels or information sources were made in the field of media perception research. Initially, within one information medium, Heeter and Greenberg (1985) analyzed and grouped TV cable and program choice. When investigating the use of different information sources, Reagan et al. (1995) found that combinations of sources are used for different purposes / with different motivations – this is in reference to the uses and gratifications approach (citing Perse and Courtright 1993, but interestingly not Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973). Using regression models, they came to the following conclusion: “For sports, the repertoire is only television and newspaper, while for what’s going on in the community, radio and newspaper – along with two technologies, cellular phone and personal computer – comprise the repertoire” (Reagan et al., 1995, p.26).

Subsequent research in the field states that “[...] little attention has been paid to the question what the overall result of all this selectivity is, how media users combine different media contacts into a comprehensive pattern of exposure or, as we call it, a *media repertoire*” (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006, p. 369, italics by that paper), and “[i]n contemporary high-choice media environments, people increasingly mix and combine their use of various news media into personal news

repertoires” (Strömbäck et al., 2018, p. 413). They find that “only social news consumers are more likely to become active in politics of-line, compared to the minimalists” (Strömbäck et al., 2018, p. 424). In relation to the subject of local media and news repertoires, the research base is limited. Tang and Lai (2018) did, however, perform a hierarchical cluster analysis in order to find multiplatform local news repertoires. What they found are three repertoires: *the determined location-independent news seekers, the light local news seekers, and the heavy local news seekers* (Tang & Lai, 2018, p. 49). Nevertheless, these results are not truly comparable to the expected results of the present study, as they refer only to the generation C/Millennials and they are not just interested in political information (Tang & Lai, 2018, p. 53). Furthermore, no effects of belonging to these repertoires on voter turnout were identified.

The present study aims to identify repertoires *and* their effects on (split-ticket) voting. Additionally, rather than focusing exclusively on media use at the local level, it also considers the role of other sources of political information. Therefore, the term *political information repertoire* is chosen. This term has already been employed in research, for example, by Wolfsfeld et al. (2016).<sup>1</sup> All information sources included in this study’s repertoire can be found in the spiderwebs in the appendix (figures 4 to 6).

There used to be no data available for Switzerland, focusing on just *local media users*. What can be found is the research (on a national level) by Udris et al. (2022). By analyzing data from a follow-up survey on the Swiss national vote of February 13, 2022, they find six repertoires. Their group of *home-land-oriented* people consists of people who mainly use national and local media. This group differs from other groups by socio-economic factors (age: many older than 50 years, gender: more females than males compared to other groups, education: averagely educated, as well as interest in politics: high; and trust in the government: relatively high; Udris et al., 2022, pp. 7–9). In this paper,

the local level is examined in more detail, and it is expected that several differing repertoires can be found. Since previous research, albeit on a national level, has shown that repertoires can be found and differ in terms of socio-demographic characteristics and political interest, the following research questions are formulated:

- › RQ1: What political information repertoires can be found in the canton of Berne?
- › RQ2: To what extent do socio-demographic variables vary in relation to the political information repertoire to which individuals belong in the canton of Berne?

### 3 The effects of local media use

While the use of media was and is of constant interest in media perception research, local media use and information seeking on a local level have always been treated somewhat conservatively and thus still represent a research gap today (e.g., Chmielewski, 2011, p. 27; Hess et al., 2022; Hess et al., 2023). The explanation for the reluctance to investigate local media use and local areas in research is probably to be found in resources: Small-scale research can lead to increased and sometimes more difficult recruitment efforts. Furthermore, funding may be more difficult to obtain, as the question of extrapolation to a larger area arises, and a good justification is needed.

Two effects of local media use that have already been analyzed are voter turnout and split-ticket voting (i.e., voting for candidates from different parties): Becker and Dunwoody (1982) came to the conclusion that media use leads to knowledge about local politics and thus to a higher probability of voting for the city of Columbus. In their research, McLeod et al. (1996) take a three-step approach: More local media use leads to more community integration and more community integration leads to more political participation (voting). They conclude: “Although evidence of a relationship between local media use and local political participation is demonstrated, the strength of the contribution differs considerably for each of the three measures of participation” (McLeod et al., 1996, p. 198). However, the effect on the measure,

1 As Wolfsfeld et al. (2016) actually limit their analysis to *media content*, thus they should probably correctly speak of political *media* repertoires.

which also includes active voting, is significant (McLeod et al., 1996, pp. 198–199). Recent research by Magasic et al. (2023, p. 411) concludes that people in Australia's Lightning Ridge also feel less willing to participate in the political process following the closure of a local newspaper. Furthermore: "They also missed political events or were denied the chance to participate in processes" (Magasic et al., 2023, p. 411). The findings of such research suggest that local media users are better informed politically, feel better informed, and see themselves as part of society, and are therefore more likely to vote. In Switzerland, Kübler and Goodman (2019) examined the impact of local media on voter turnout. They did not utilize survey data directly; they employed voter turnout and media market data instead. Moreover, they just researched the six largest cities (municipalities) and their printed newspapers in Switzerland. In their thus limited study, they draw the following conclusion: "[...] newspaper audience in a municipality and the congruence of newspaper markets with municipal territories both have substantial positive effects on levels of turnout in municipal elections" (Kübler & Goodman, 2019, p. 1). Given that a correlation has already been found for some Swiss cities, the corresponding hypothesis and research question are:

- › RQ3: Does belonging to a particular political information repertoire have an effect on the likelihood of voting?
- › H1: Local newspaper use is positively related to the likelihood of voting.<sup>2</sup>

This paper not only questions whether someone is more likely to vote, but also whether someone is more likely to vote for varying parties instead of just one, depending on the local media use. The assumption underpinning this is that local media users get a wide range of opinions and balanced political information. Therefore, they might have less incentive to vote in a polarized way but actually vote for candidates from different parties (for exam-

ple, because they agree on some issues and not just use the heuristic of party voting)<sup>3</sup>. In the US, this phenomenon is called split-ticket voting. Moskowitz (2021, p. 126) analyses split-ticket voting in the US with a view to the local TV market and comes to the conclusion: "Exposure to relevant local news coverage has considerable effects on voter knowledge of both officeholders and nonincumbent candidates. [...] voters residing in in-state markets are about 2–3 percentage points more likely to cast a split president–senator ticket and 4–5 percentage points more likely to cast a split president–governor ticket" (Moskowitz, 2021, p. 126). Despite the fact that Switzerland does not operate within the framework of a two-party system, but has a multi-party political structure, the same tendency towards reduced polarization in voting is, in this study, termed split-ticket voting. The assumption is that people who get their political information from a well-balanced information repertoire are better informed and vote in a more nuanced way and more in line with their true personal preferences (those personal preferences being described by Milic, 2012). This *voting in a nuanced way* is expected to be a shift away from pure party loyalty and towards split-ticket voting. The option of voting behavior comparable to the US split-ticket voting in Switzerland is called *panaschieren* – when voting, you can combine names of candidates from different voting lists<sup>4</sup> (Swiss Confederation: Art. 35). Therefore, the corresponding hypothesis and research questions are:

- › RQ4: Does belonging to a particular political information repertoire have an effect on the likelihood of the Swiss split-ticket voting?

As previously outlined, an explicit hypothesis concerning the effect of local newspapers (online or printed format) use is:

- › H2: Local newspaper use is positively related to the likelihood of split-ticket voting.

2 Since the data set also allows for a specific analysis of printed and online newspapers, this hypothesis is formulated in the tradition of previous news desert research.

3 Heuristics in context are explained by Fortunato and Stevenson (2019)

4 These lists do not necessarily correspond to the party affiliation of the candidates on the list, but for the sake of simplicity, they are treated as equivalent to parties in the following.

Testing this hypothesis will also clarify whether nowadays it is still possible to focus in news desert research on newspapers (online and in printed format), or whether it is no longer possible to make any statements at all about this channel and the effects of its use.

#### 4 Method and design

In order to answer the questions and test the hypotheses posed in the paper, data from an online survey were analyzed. This unique survey data set was collated by Professor Dr. Nathalie Giger and Dr. Maxime Walder, in conjunction with their SNSF project<sup>5</sup> team, for the purposes of their research. The data set was subsequently provided to the answering of the research questions posed in this paper. The initial survey comprised two waves (pre- and post-election survey) in 2022 in the Swiss canton of Berne. Such a detailed survey on media use and voting behavior in cantonal elections is rare, and there appears to be a paucity of comparable data on this scale for Switzerland itself. In addition, in the online survey, they explicitly asked about media titles, which makes it possible to examine local media use in even greater detail in this paper. For the following study, only the data from the post-election survey is used in order to be able to include voting behavior in the models. The Bernese Grand Council (legislative) and the Cantonal Government (executive) elections took place on March 27, 2022. The data set ( $N=5904$ ) contains responses that were all submitted between March 28 and April 9, 2022. The survey was available in German and French, as the canton of Berne is bilingual. The adjusted data set, which contains data for the required repertoires model calculations, contains 5616 cases. This adjusted data set shows a slight overrepresentation of men (52.18% instead of 49.2% for  $N=5904$ ; 52.78% for  $N=5616$ ). To test the hypotheses, a cluster analysis was first conducted using the statistical computing program R. This was followed by descriptive evaluations, correla-

tion calculations (chi-square and Spearman's rank), and hierarchical generalized linear regression models. All questions from the survey used, including the response options and the variables' scale levels, are listed in table 5 in the appendix.

The information sources used on a local level can be derived from the answers to the question "Which of the following options have you used in the last two months to find out about the Bernese elections or politics in general?" (a semi-closed question with 12 sources of information given, the possibility of multiple answers, and an additional individual answer). The responses to the 12 closed questions were designated as dummy variables and incorporated into a hierarchical cluster model, using the Ward method (based on descriptions of a similarly designed data set in Matthes & Kohring, 2008, and Hands & Everitt, 1987).

In the subsequently calculated models, each repertoire, was recoded into a binary variable, followed by a generalized linear regression model calculation with the repertoire dummy being the *dependent variable* (see table 2). The *independent variables* in these models are age, gender, political interest, party preference, and urbanity of the place of residence. These first three variables were extracted directly from the survey data set. Age and gender (as socio-economic variables) and interest in politics are included in the model as they proved to be important in previous research (e.g., Udris et al., 2022). Unfortunately, it is not possible to control for education as these data are not available. As demonstrated in Udris et al., a correlation appears to exist between distinct national use repertoires and party affiliation in Switzerland (Udris et al., 2022, p. 8). Consequently, the party preference is controlled for. Party preference is a recoded variable from the question "Which party did you vote for in the legislative elections or from which party did you vote for the most candidates?" In accordance with Ernst et al.'s (2017, 256–257) research, the five largest parties were coded. As Ernst et al. (2017) rate *the Green party* (Grüne) and *the Social Democratic Party of Switzerland* (SP) almost equally on the left–right scale, an ordinal variable 1 = left and 4 = right was created, whereby Grüne and SP were both

5 Their research project for the national research program 77 is called "Online News Exposure: A Threat to Democracy? How Digital Transformation Affects Opinion Formation, Political Polarization and Trust"

given the value 1. *The center party* (Die Mitte) gets the value 2, *the Free Democratic Party of Switzerland* (FDP) gets the value 3, and the *Swiss People's Party* (SVP) gets the value 4 (see table 5 in the appendix).

Furthermore, the geographical location of the respondents' places of residents is incorporated as a control variable, categorized as follows: urban centers, areas of influence by urban centers, and areas outside the influence of urban centers (rural areas). This variable originates from a data set provided by the Federal Statistical Office (2022) and was subsequently merged with the survey data set. This variable is employed as a control variable, operating under the assumption that there is more local media content available in urban centers compared to rural areas. This might have an influence on local media consumption habits, which, already in 2012, was found to be true for the US by Miller et al. (2012, p. 4, compare also to the base of the latest local media outlet data set for Switzerland generated by Hilse et al., 2025).

The socio-economic variable income was derived from a data set by the Federal Statistical Office (2009–2024); however, these data do not exist on an individual level but is a mean value for each municipality<sup>6</sup>.

In the regression models testing for effects on voting and split-ticket voting, the already mentioned variables are used as *independent variables*, as well as belonging to a certain repertoire, and a recoded variable on actual local newspaper use. This variable stems from the data set, which contains a substantial question on the exact outlets' titles used<sup>7</sup>. Consequently, it is imperative to incorporate this variable, particularly given the extensive research conducted on local newspaper use within the context of news desert research. However, it was necessary to recode

the variable to incorporate it: There were 16 predefined options and one field for free additions. All these answers, the predefined and the self-added titles, were divided into the new variable local/non-local using the Swiss local media data set (Burger, Meyer, et al., 2024). This list of local media published in 2024 comprises a total of 489 local media (printed newspaper, online newspaper, radio, and TV) in four national languages (German, French, Italian, and Romansh), with 63 for the canton of Berne (Burger, Meyer, et al., 2024). Each newspaper mentioned was counted in a newly built variable. As the canton of Berne – with the national capital Berne – is the canton with the second largest population in Switzerland, it is still one of the cantons with a relatively large number of local media (Burger, Meyer, et al., 2024; Federal Statistical Office of Switzerland, 2022; Hilse et al., 2025). Hence, the variable that counts the use of newspapers has values from 0 ( $N=1\,362$ ) to 5 ( $N=3$ ). A second dummy variable, 'use/non-use', was created from this variable to ascertain whether there is a difference in the use of one or many local newspapers. The findings resulting from this are presented in the following chapter.

## 5 Findings

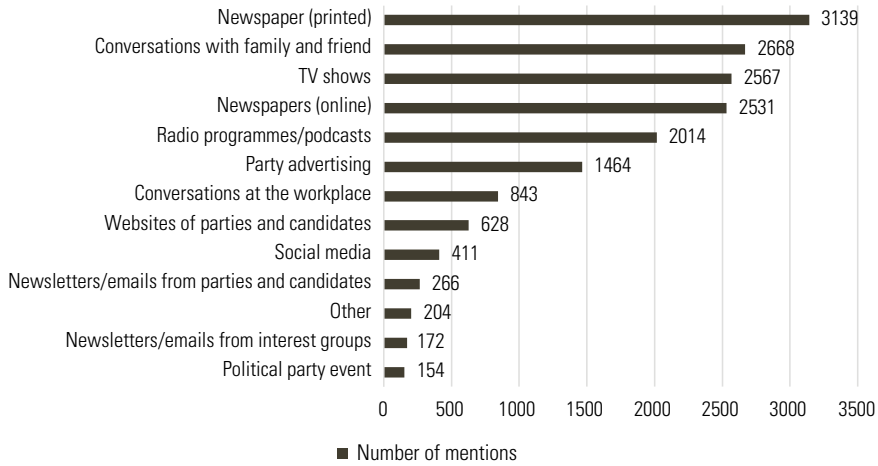
### 5.1 Information sources and local media

In order to gain insight into the media and information sources in use at a local level, a preliminary descriptive evaluation of information sources is being conducted. Figure 1 shows that printed newspapers are the most frequently mentioned source of information, followed by family conversations and television news. Political party events were mentioned the least. *Other* includes the official voting information booklet that is made available to every voter, together with the voting documents, and easyvote.ch, a website of the organization of Swiss youth parliaments that explains Swiss votes. These results, therefore, differ relatively strongly from a statistical analysis of a national survey conducted in Switzerland in 2023 (Tresch et al., p. 45). Here, respondents most frequently cited conversations with family as a source of information; newspapers only came in third place, after TV/radio (Tresch et al., p. 45).

6 The Federal Statistical Office's data, which was merged with the data set, was linked via the municipality number. As the survey data set only contained ZIP codes, it was necessary to undertake an intermediate step (manual assignment of municipality names to unique municipality numbers) to achieve this.

7 "You indicated that you used newspapers (online or print) to find out about Berne's elections and politics in general. Which of the following media did you use?"

**Figure 1: Sources of information used in the last two months for Bernese elections and politics in general**



Note: Multiple mentions possible (N=5525).

**Table 1: Mean values per cluster (hierarchical cluster analysis with Ward method)**

Information source used	The informed socializers	The traditionalists	The wooped ones	The online readers
Newspaper (printed)	0.50	0.62	0.64	0.35
Newspaper (online)	0.42	0.36	0.37	1.00
TV	0.40	0.67	0.36	0.00
Radio/podcast	0.34	0.41	0.34	0.00
Websites by parties/candidates	0.18	0.00	0.00	0.00
Emails/newsletters from parties/candidates	0.05	0.00	0.02	0.00
Advertising by parties or candidates (flyers etc.)	0.13	0.06	1.00	0.00
Events / podiums / personal contact etc.	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.00
Emails/newsletters from interest groups	0.02	0.00	0.01	0.00
Talking to family or friends	0.71	0.08	0.43	0.00
Talking at work / at school	0.24	0.00	0.04	0.00
Social media / messenger apps	0.10	0.00	0.01	0.00

A closer look at social media use shows that Instagram was mentioned most frequently, followed by Facebook and messaging services such as Twitter and Threema (see figure 2 in the appendix). Only two out of 394 people who explicitly stated using social media as a tool for information cited the streaming platform Twitch. The mean age of the social media users<sup>8</sup> is 41.43 years. The mean value of the non-users is 55.17 years, which makes the social media users for political information significantly younger than the non-users (Welch t-test:  $<0.001$ ; Spearman's rank correlation rho is significant with value  $-0.18$ ). Hence, there is a weak negative correlation between age and use of social media.

## 5.2 The four political information repertoires found

The hierarchical cluster analysis results in four easily interpretable groups of local information users, thus four political information repertoires. A more granular division into clusters results in too many and smaller groups (see figure 6 in the appendix). The 4-cluster solution was therefore chosen (see table 1, and visualized as spider webs in the appendix in figures 3–6). Each cluster represents one political information repertoire.

The first repertoire is characterized by a comparatively high degree of information use through traditional media channels, namely radio, printed newspapers, and television. Additionally, the values for online newspaper use and talking to family and friends ( $N=2930$ ) are high as well. Consequently, people belonging to this repertoire are named the *informed socializers*. The second repertoire's members inform themselves almost exclusively via the legacy, more traditional media, fewer online newspapers, hence they are called *the traditionalists* ( $N=1463$ ). The third repertoire comprises *the wooded ones* ( $N=888$ ). Its members use the more traditional media channels somewhat, but have an extremely high score for advertising by parties or candidates as a source of information. The fourth repertoire is the *online readers*

( $N=335$ ). They have an almost exclusive and high value for reading online newspapers.

The generalized linear regression models' values per repertoire can be found in table 2 below. Age is a significant<sup>9</sup> independent variable for each affiliation to a repertoire, with a negative sign for the informed socializers and the online readers (less likelihood of affiliation with increasing age). Women are significantly more likely to belong to the repertoire of the informed socializers than men, while men are significantly more likely to belong to the repertoire of the online readers than women. Those who voted mainly for the party Die Mitte or FDP are significantly less likely to belong to the repertoire of the informed socializers compared to the SP/Grüne voters. On the other hand, the same voters are significantly more often in the repertoire of the traditionalists compared to the SP/Grüne voters. Residents of areas of influence of urban centers are significantly less likely to be in the repertoire of online readers compared to residents of cities.<sup>10</sup> Since the inclusion of estimated income did not improve the models and was not significant in any of the repertoires, the variable is excluded here, and models that do not include the variable are listed for the sake of clarity.

## 5.3 Effects on voting

Variables that have an effect on the probability of voting are summarized in linear regression models, which can be found in table 3 in the appendix. The table shows first the effect of local newspaper use on the likelihood of voting on a cantonal level. Thus, newspaper use is still significant in times of a wide range of information sources available and controlling for different political information repertoires (hypothesis 1 can thus be retained). While the dummy variable for local newspaper use is significant, the exact number of newspapers used has no significant effect on the likelihood of voting. People who are interested in politics have a significantly higher probability of voting (in this case, participation in the cantonal election). While the urban/rural place of res-

8 Not all of the 411 people who said they would use social media in figure 1 also mentioned a certain source they would use. The calculations with social media use are just done with those mentioning at least one ( $N=394$ ).

9 Please note: All information on models in the following that are reported as significant contain the assumption "ceteris paribus" and  $p < 0.05$ .

10 See table 6 in the appendix for more information on this variable's values.

**Table 2: GLM regression models with each political information repertoire as dependent variable**

	The informed socializers	The traditionalists	The wooped ones	The online readers
Intercept	0.79 (0.79)	-2.32** (0.87)	-1.61 (0.86)	-13.35 (323.74)
Age	-0.02*** (0.00)	0.03*** (0.00)	0.01*** (0.00)	-0.02*** (0.00)
Gender: female	0.16* (0.08)	-0.14 (0.09)	0.14 (0.10)	-0.69*** (0.18)
Rather not interested in politics compared to not interested at all	0.31 (0.79)	-0.03 (0.86)	-0.87 (0.86)	12.05 (323.74)
Rather interested in politics compared to not interested at all	0.56 (0.78)	-0.35 (0.85)	-0.76 (0.85)	11.78 (323.74)
Very interested in politics compared to not interested at all	0.89 (0.78)	-0.70 (0.85)	-0.90 (0.85)	11.79 (323.74)
Die Mitte compared to SP/Grüne	-0.38*** (0.11)	0.41*** (0.12)	0.16 (0.15)	-0.25 (0.28)
FDP compared to SP/Grüne	-0.22* (0.11)	0.35** (0.12)	0.01 (0.15)	-0.31 (0.25)
SVP compared to SP/Grüne	-0.19 (0.10)	0.19 (0.12)	0.16 (0.13)	-0.18 (0.23)
Area of influence by urban centers compared to urban centers	0.02 (0.09)	0.10 (0.10)	-0.01 (0.12)	-0.47* (0.23)
Areas outside the influence of urban centers compared to urban centers	-0.14 (0.09)	0.18 (0.11)	-0.00 (0.13)	0.08 (0.20)
AIC	4220.58	3461.52	2790.93	1257.49
BIC	4287.15	3528.09	2857.50	1324.06
Log Likelihood	-2099.29	-1719.76	-1384.46	-617.74
Deviance	4198.58	3439.52	2768.93	1235.49
Num. obs.	3140	3140	3140	3140

Note: \*\*\* $p < 0.001$ ; \*\* $p < 0.01$ ; \* $p < 0.05$ .

idence does not have a significant effect on the probability of voting, belonging to some repertoires does: Compared to the traditionalists, the informed socializers and the online readers have a lower probability of voting.

#### 5.4 Effects on split-ticket voting

The effects on split-ticket voting can be found in table 4 in the appendix. As for voting, using a local newspaper (printed or online format) does have a significant effect on the probability that voters add candidates from another party list to their preferred list when voting for the Grand Council (using local media as a dummy variable). Hypothesis 2 can therefore be retained. Neither age, gender, nor political interest has a significant effect on the probability of split-ticket voting. However, party preference has a significant effect on the probability of split-ticket voting: Those who feel more affiliated with Die Mitte or SVP are significantly more likely to vote in the split-ticket compared to those affiliated with SP/Grüne. Living in an area outside the influence of urban centers, compared to an urban core area, significantly increases the probability of ticket splitting. While income does have a negative and significant effect, the effect is very small. Looking at the repertoires, informed socializers are significantly more likely to split their ticket compared to the traditionalists, while the wooded ones are significantly less likely to do so compared to the traditionalists.

## 6 Discussion

The data show that legacy media in the local area, and especially local printed and online newspapers, are still being used in a highly digitized communication landscape. Social media use, by contrast, is currently a relatively weak source of political information for the Bernese citizens. The question posed by the paper's title (No local newspapers but WhatsApp?) must be denied on the basis of this data. However, as younger people are more likely to use social media to inform themselves about local politics, it can be assumed that the response to this question will be subject to alteration in the future. Given the diversity of sources of information on local

political issues, it is argued that consideration should be extended to political information repertoires rather than merely to individual sources. The key differences found in relation to affiliation to the repertoires are consistent with the findings of recent national media research (Udris et al., 2022). Older people are found to be more likely to use legacy media and, therefore, are more likely to be considered traditionalists. Additionally, younger people are found to be more likely to be online readers. This finding is in line with research on the digital skills of Switzerland's population by Kappeler (2024, pp. 8–9). In her study, she found that older people still rate their digital skills lower than young people do.

With regard to the regression models analyzing the effect on voting, the local newspaper variable is worthy of consideration: The research indicates that there is no discernible difference in terms of whether individuals read multiple local newspapers or just one. However, the positive impact observed in news desert studies, which suggests that local newspaper use is associated with an increased likelihood of voting (e. g., Cagé, 2020; Filla & Johnson, 2010; Schulhofer-Wohl & Garrido, 2013), is also evident in this context. This is a fascinating area of research, as these models even controlled for affiliation to different repertoires. The critique (Usher, 2023; Wells et al., 2021) that the study of local newspaper use is outdated today does not (yet) seem appropriate, at least at the local level in Switzerland. This could be due to the fact that, although the number of local media and local newspapers in Switzerland is declining, the total number and especially the number of newspapers (printed or online format) is still high compared to other countries (Hilse et al., 2025). The finding that informed socializers and online readers are less likely to vote than traditionalists suggests that the use of legacy media is still a crucial factor in deciding whether to vote or not. It can also be assumed that those who consume a lot of legacy media are also more interested in politics.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> The causality in this case is not entirely clear: It could also be assumed that those who are more interested consume therefore more legacy media. Further discourse on this topic will not be pursued at this point, due to limitations of space.

The research indicates that the use of local newspapers has a favorable impact on split-ticket voting, a finding that aligns with the results observed in the USA (Moskowitz, 2021). It needs to be addressed that the sheer use of local newspapers has a significant effect on the Swiss *panaschieren*; the number of newspapers consumed does not. This may indicate that the local newspapers used in Berne provide balanced coverage, although this assumption should be treated with caution and verified by content analysis. The effects found for party preference and the likelihood of split-ticket voting appear to be reasonable: Those who prefer *Die Mitte* are voting accordingly (as the name suggests), and combinations with the right or the left are quite plausible. The fact that people preferring SVP are more likely to engage in ticket splitting than those preferring SP/Grüne might be explained by its proximity to FDP in certain respects. If SP and Grüne had been listed individually, we might have seen comparable results, since a shift in votes can be observed at the national level between the SP and Grüne in Switzerland (Enggist et al., 2022, p.3). It is noteworthy that the probability of split-ticket voting is higher among individuals residing in rural areas (where there are probably also fewer local newspapers available in total) compared to those inhabiting urban centers. This result was not expected, and further research is needed here. Furthermore, what might be interesting for political candidates and spin doctors in these results is the repertoire of the *wooded ones*. While they are not more likely to vote than traditionalists, they are significantly less likely to split their tickets. Those who are primarily informed by election advertising that is delivered to them (push) and do not have to seek it out themselves (pull) appear to vote more strictly along party lines. In order to gain deeper insights, it would be necessary to combine these results with content analysis of the actual pushed content. This would provide some answers to the following question: Which parties are responsible for the production of more push advertising content? It may be the case that there is an inequitable distribution of advertising content across parties, which could give rise to a subsequent research project on the advertising content itself, its consumption, and the resulting effects.

## 7 Conclusion and limitations

The present study investigates the overarching question of which information sources the citizens of the Swiss canton of Berne utilize for the purpose of getting information on politics prior to a cantonal election. As this paper shows, newspapers are still considered to be an especially important source of information. This is followed by conversations with friends and television. Using survey data, four political information repertoires can be found: the informed socializers, the traditionalists, the *wooded ones*, and the online readers (RQ1). Citizens belonging to one of those repertoires differ from each other in terms of socio-demographic variables. For instance, there is a higher probability of women than men belonging to the repertoire of the informed socializers, while the opposite is true for the repertoire of the online readers (RQ2). There are some significant effects of the likelihood of voting and split-ticket voting depending on what political information repertoire a citizen belongs to. For example, online readers are significantly less likely to vote compared to traditionalists (RQ3). Furthermore, the *wooded ones* are significantly less likely to split their tickets compared to the traditionalists (RQ4). A close examination of newspaper use, both printed and online ones, reveals a significant positive correlation between newspaper use and voter turnout, as well as the probability of splitting tickets (H1, H2) – whereby the number of different newspaper used did not result in any significant values in the models.

Despite the fact that all the research questions and hypotheses presented in this study have been addressed, some weaknesses can be identified: More reliable data for the control variables would be desirable. Unfortunately, the data set does not contain any data on income or education. The income data was merged with 2023 income data at the municipal level, which can lead to strong distortions in individual cases – not all residents of a municipality earn the same amount. This might also be the reason why the variable income was not significant in the models and thus was excluded. Moreover, when merging data in Switzerland over time, minor inaccuracies may arise due to

municipal mergers, where the identification numbers of Swiss municipalities are either eliminated or abruptly encompass a more extensive geographical area. Finally, a number of concluding thoughts for future research: An in-depth look at the available local media and political advertorial content would be of interest in order to get a better understanding of the local content citizens consume and the effects of consumption. Especially in the contemporary era of pseudo-local journalism and the dissemination of misinformation, it would be relevant to know to what content users are referring when they indicate using local newspapers without mentioning specific names.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the combination of survey data with content analyses would be ideal. Such an approach would facilitate a more precise investigation into the effects of local media (use) on citizens. However, it is noteworthy that content analyses of local media content are still rare, although there has been published a detailed analyses of Swiss local media recently (Dalmus et al., 2024). It is considered beneficial that further research of this nature be undertaken at a local level in the future (see also Burger, Künzler, & Autenrieth, 2024a, 2024b for recent research on Swiss local media).

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### Conflict of interest

I declare no conflict of interest.

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<sup>12</sup> See for the project on this topic: [www.fhgr.ch/pinkslime](http://www.fhgr.ch/pinkslime)

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