

Connectivity in Action: Activist Comments as Evidence of a Pan- European Public Sphere on Social Media

A Case Study of the European Commission's Instagram
Page

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Abstract

The features of social media platforms not only enable the communication between citizens and political actors or institutions, in the form of comments, but also help in magnifying citizens' voices and opinions and facilitating mass mobilization or political protests. The European Union institutions seem to understand the capacity of social media as a locus for citizen engagement, be it activism or deliberation, and have thus developed a strong presence across platforms.

The purpose of this dissertation is to investigate citizens' interaction on the European Commission (EC)'s Instagram page. In particular, this case study analyzes **comments** as a form of digital engagement and asks about the nature of this engagement (activist or deliberative content), as well as about the aims and main concerns discussed by these commenters. In addition, the thesis is looking at the role of social media in building and maintaining a **European identity** and investigates whether the activist comments display any signs of a Europeanized public sphere.

Considering the interdisciplinary scope of the paper, traditional methods within humanities and social sciences were combined. The content of the dataset collected manually from the EC's Instagram page, over three months—July 1 to September 30, 2020—was quantitatively and qualitatively analyzed.

The findings of the research present the European Commission's Instagram page as a locus for activism in which citizens support different issues. Some are national—Polish citizens fighting for LGBTIQ+ rights, some are European—discussion on EU policies and areas of action, and even others are global—the case of unmarried binational couples which are restricted from reuniting due to the inexistence of an appropriate exception. Moreover, the analysis demonstrates that citizen-activists are the product of European integration; they choose to voice their opinions on the pan-European space provided by the social media platform. In this sense, they enact their European identity by expressing themselves politically in a transnational digital space offered by Instagram.

Keywords: Activism, Cyberactivism, European identity, European public sphere, Social media, Europeanization, European Commission, Instagram, politics, engagement, comments, citizens.

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Table of contents

Acknowledgments

Table of contents

List of abbreviations

List of figures

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Presentation of the topic and the relevance of the research.....	1
1.2. Research questions	3
1.3. Thesis structure	3
2. Theoretical framework, key concepts, and literature review	4
2.1. European institutions on social media.....	5
2.1.1. Role of social media in building and maintaining a European identity & citizenship	7
2.1.2. A Europeanized public sphere	9
2.2. Social media and political engagement online.....	12
2.3. Defining digital political activism.....	15
2.3.1. Connective action.....	16
3. Methodology and data selection	18
3.1. Context.....	19
3.2. Data collection	23
3.2.1. Data collection through Instagram.....	23
3.2.2. Instagram as a site of research	25
3.2.3. Ethical considerations.....	26
3.3. The official Instagram page of the European Commission: the sampling process	
27	
3.3.1. The context of posts	29
3.3.2. Types of comments	29

3.4. General limitations	31
4. Results	32
4.1. Number of comments and posts per day	33
4.2. Commenting frequency per day	34
4.3. Engagement by the topic of the post	35
4.4. Occurrence for each type of comment.....	36
4.5. Engagement by the type of comment	37
4.6. Comment types within topic categories	39
4.7. Results of the quantitative content analysis	40
4.8. Results of the qualitative content analysis.....	45
5. Discussion	48
RQ1: To what extent is the European Commission’s Instagram page a locus for citizen activism?	49
RQ2: Which types of activists populate the comment sector of this particular international page?.....	52
RQ3: Are activist comments displaying signs of a Europeanized public sphere?	54
6. Conclusion	57
Bibliography	60
Appendix	71

List of abbreviations

EC	European Commission
EU	European Union
EUCFR	Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union
EP	European Parliament
IPP	Individual Political Participation
LGBTIQ+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Intersex or Questioning
SOTEU	The State of the European Union
TFEU	Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union
US	United States

List of figures

Figure 1 Topics	28
Figure 2 The use of # on Instagram	31
Figure 3 The use of @ on Instagram.....	31
Figure 4 Number of posts and comments per day	33
Figure 5 Frequency of comments per day	34
Figure 6 Engagement by the topic of the post	35
Figure 7 Percentage of occurrence for each type of comment	36
Figure 8 Engagement by the type of comment.....	37
Figure 9 Post nr. 173 on September 22, 2020	38
Figure 10 Engagement of each type of comment by the topic of the posts	39
Figure 11 High-frequency words within the dataset.....	41
Figure 12 High-frequency words in meaningful comments.....	43
Figure 13 High-frequency words in activist comments	44

List of tables

Table 1 High-frequency meaningful and activist words across the topics.....	42
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1. Introduction

1.1. Presentation of the topic and the relevance of the research

During the recent decades, the power of new digital technologies as essential tools which allow citizens to redefine society and regulate its policies became undeniable. An irreplaceable instrument for citizen expression and a source of information, social media contributes to connecting people on its borderless social networking platforms. These Web-based communication tools not only facilitate daily online social interaction, debate, or online expression, but also the dissemination of political news and information.¹ However, social media can also be used to spread disinformation and to mobilize audiences towards activist causes.² In comparison with conventional social movements, connective action, as described by Bennett and Segerberg, enables citizens to engage in personally expressive modes of action concerning matters they share with like-minded people.³

Recently, online comments and hashtags started to be described as centerpieces of online political engagement. Within social media platforms, citizens can engage with politicians, institutions, pose questions or post comments on political issues,⁴ as well as express political beliefs and join various campaigns.⁵ When it comes to digital activism, large-scale connective action is mainly coordinated by inclusive slogans, which use the hashtag as a facilitator to heighten a cause and to make it viral on social media platforms.⁶

In a period of propaganda, media manipulation, and Euroscepticism, the European Union understands the pertinent capacity of social media to maintain a stable connection and direct

¹ Ariel A. Hasell and Brian E. Weeks, "Partisan Provocation: The Role of Partisan News Use and Emotional Responses in Political Information Sharing in Social Media," *Human Communication Research* 42, no. 1 (October, 2016): 641; Homero Gil de Zúñiga, Nakwon Jung, and Sebastián Valenzuela, "Social Media Use for News and Individuals' Social Capital, Civic Engagement and Political Participation," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 17, no. 3 (April 2012): 328-329; Leticia Bode, "Political News in the News Feed: Learning Politics from Social Media," *Mass Communication and Society* 19, no. 1 (2016): 24.

² Alcides Velasquez and Robert LaRose, "Social Media for Social Change: Social Media Political Efficacy and Activism in Student Activist Groups," *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media* 59, no. 3, (2015): 469; Dhiraj Murthy, "Introduction to Social Media, Activism, and Organizations," *Social Media + Society*, (January 2018): 1; Sebastián Valenzuela, "Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior: The Roles of Information, Opinion Expression, and Activism," *American Behavioral Scientist* 57, no. 7 (July 2013): 935.

³ W. Lance Bennett and Alexandra Segerberg, eds., *The Logic of Connective Action: Digital Media and the Personalization of Contentious Politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 24.

⁴ Alan Steinberg, "Exploring Web 2.0 political engagement: Is new technology reducing the biases of political participation?," *Electoral Studies* 39 (2015): 104.

⁵ Valenzuela, "Unpacking the Use of Social Media for Protest Behavior", 935.

⁶ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 2.

communication with citizens⁷ also by increasing the transparency of European politics.⁸ As a result, all EU institutions, agencies, and main representatives share their work on frequently-used social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. These accounts are updated daily and allow citizens to interact both with the institutions themselves or with other citizens to actively contribute with personalized thoughts in the form of comments.

The overriding objective of this research is to investigate the commenters who choose to voice their beliefs publicly and react to content associated with the EU on social media, as well as to understand whether the EC's Instagram page is a locus for activism or deliberation. More specifically, it intends to assess who are the citizens that engage through commenting on the international public sphere, what are their most common agendas, as well as their motivations and factors which lead to this type of online participation. The thesis also investigates whether the activist comments display any signs of a Europeanized public sphere. The humanistic dimension of the thesis is given by examining the role of social media in building and maintaining a European identity, as mediated by a common European public sphere.

There is a growing corpus of research on activist citizen engagement on social media. Previous studies have already explained the paramount significance of social media platforms in the political context and their effects on public opinion, but since Instagram is mainly a visual platform, little has been conducted on the written content of Instagram, in particular comments. This does not necessarily mean that there have not been any efforts to research this platform. There are indeed several papers dealing with the imagery and the audio-visual content of Instagram, but next to nothing specifically related to comments and the message behind them. Moreover, digital activism at a European level was not something to be extensively considered by previous researchers. Therefore, this is the exact gap of knowledge the current thesis would like to help to address by picturing the pan-European structure of the European Commission on Instagram.

⁷ Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou, "Do We Need to Rethink EU Politics in the Social Media Era? An Introduction to the Volume," in *Social Media and European Politics: Rethinking Power and Legitimacy in the Digital Era*, ed. Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 2.

⁸ Ancuța-Gabriela Tarța, "A Framework for Evaluating European Social Media Publics: The Case of the European Parliament's Facebook Page," in *Social Media and European Politics: Rethinking Power and Legitimacy in the Digital Era*, ed. Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 162.

1.2. Research questions

The core purpose of this dissertation is to understand the nature of the discussion in the comment fields of the European Commission's Instagram page, the type of commenters it attracts, as well as their agendas and whether or not the activist comments display signs of a Europeanized public sphere. In order to fully grasp these attitudes and to depict the full-scale picture, the study is fortified by the following research questions:

RQ1: To what extent is the European Commission's Instagram page a locus for citizen activism?

RQ2: Which types of activists populate the comment sector of the international page?

RQ3: Are activist comments displaying signs of a Europeanized public sphere?

1.3. Thesis structure

This thesis is structured into five chapters. The introduction outlines the relevance of the topic, the research gap, and the research questions around which the study was built. The expedition proceeds by placing this research issue within the extensive field of previous literature dissecting the political uses of the virtual space and social media platforms. More precisely, this second chapter combines the theoretical framework of the research and a brief overview of relevant previous studies.

On one hand, the literature review will first provide a general image of the different relations between politics and social media and then continue with contouring the particular matters of the research, namely the behavior of the most active commenters, the typology, and interests of an activist, together with the communication strategies and the outcomes of the presence of European institutions in the digital world.

On the other hand, the theoretical foundation grounds the different hypotheses derived from the research questions that will be thoroughly discussed. As part of the humanistic dimension of the thesis, social media will be explored as a catalyst for building and maintaining a European identity and citizenship. Moreover, concepts such as a possible emerging European sphere and political engagement online, as well as theories of digital activism

solidify the analysis of activist phenomena and unveil the transnational character of the EC's Instagram page.

The third chapter, methodology and data selection, starts with a short contextualization of the main events that marked the time period during which the research data was collected. The section then discloses the relevance and main particularities of Instagram as a research platform for humanities. Thereafter, the method and research design are described, outlining the detailed processes of data gathering. The study embraces an interdisciplinary approach, employing traditional methodologies from both the world of humanities and the world of social sciences. Towards the end of the section, crucial ethical considerations of conducting a content analysis on social media, as well as general limitations of the study are outlined.

Chapter four starts by introducing an overview of the collected data, then goes on to present the findings of both quantitative and qualitative parts, using graphs, charts and word clouds as well as quotations from the comments.

The final section delves into the meaning of the results, by critically reviewing them through relating the findings to the literature review, theoretical framework, and key concepts. This interpretative section is structured into three parts, intended for each of the three research questions.

Finally, the conclusion ends the thesis with a succinct overview of the contributions and findings of the study and sets the stage for further research.

2. Theoretical framework, key concepts, and literature review

The core purpose of this thesis is to examine and understand the online activist engagement of the citizens and the nature of comment generators in a political context, in the particular digital setting of the EC's Instagram page. To do so, this chapter first scrutinizes how citizens can get engaged at a European level by utilizing the EU institutions' social networking platforms. This section investigates the role of social media in building and maintaining a European identity and citizenship, as well as the Europeanization of the public sphere. After that, it proceeds with an analysis of the role of social media and its relationship with online political engagement. Lastly, the chapter concludes with theories of digital political activism.

The theories and previous relevant research studies outlined in this chapter defend the stance that both online comments and social media, in general, represent a useful tool for raising

awareness of disregarded topics and media coverage omissions.⁹ This means that besides the fact that the action of commenting can be described as a means for political engagement, it also contributes to the expansion of activism, social protest, and mobilization on social media.¹⁰

The paper has at its base the idea that digital media is a catalyst for our understanding of political engagement. Digital media are networked platforms typified by their internet operation, global networking scope, and instant accessibility and distribution of information.¹¹ As part of digital media, platforms became the default locus for political debate but also for ideologically slanted information and false news. In a research conducted by Pew Research Center, it was observed that the new discussion spheres have been a thorn in the flesh of the activist watchdogs¹², who focus on the negotiation for change gradually and with regards to potential external favorable circumstances and perils.¹³

The invention of the term “Web 2.0” in 2005 by Tim O’Reilly—described as a “community of connected users”¹⁴—contributed to the development of social media platforms. Since these Web-based platforms are used as a tool for both networking establishment and communication¹⁵, they allowed citizens “to voice their opinions”¹⁶ through the most accessible public expression way—comments.

2.1. European institutions on social media

At a European level, citizens have the opportunity to become active and share impactful perspectives, as well as influence decisions and engage with public figures on the social media networks of the EU institutions.

⁹ Tobias Eberwein, “‘Trolls’ or ‘warriors of faith’? Differentiating dysfunctional forms of media criticism in online comments,” *Journal of Information, Communication and Ethics in Society* 18, no. 4 (2019): 577.

¹⁰ John Postill, “Digital Politics and Political Engagement,” in *Digital Anthropology*, ed. Heather A. Horst and Daniel Miller (London: Berg, 2012), 168.

¹¹ Eva Anduiza, Michael J. Jensen, and Laia Jorba, eds., *Digital Media and Political Engagement Worldwide: A Comparative Study* (Cambridge: Cambridge University press, 2012), 2-3.

¹² Lee Rainie and Aaron Smith, “Social networking sites and politics,” Pew Research Center. Accessed February 27, 2021.

¹³ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 3.

¹⁴ Daniel Trottier and Christian Fuchs, “Theorising Social Media, Politics and the State: An Introduction,” in *Social Media, Politics and the State: Protests, Revolutions, Riots, Crime and Policing in the Age of Facebook, Twitter and YouTube*, ed. Daniel Trottier and Christian Fuchs (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 4.

¹⁵ *Ibid*, 6.

¹⁶ Anders Sundnes Løvlie, Karoline Andrea Ihlebæk, and Anders Olof Larsson, “User Experiences with Editorial Control in Online Newspaper Comment Fields,” *Journalism Practice* 12, no. 3 (2018): 365.

In traditional politics, research has demonstrated a trend in the direction of citizens feeling disconnected from public life.¹⁷ However, throughout the past decade or so, the use of social media for political communication became quite common, as it has the huge potential to involve citizens and create beneficial networks and links both between citizens themselves and between citizens and politicians.

The first successful example linked to the strategic use of social media in political media is the 2008 US election.¹⁸ Consequently, similar approaches were reproduced worldwide, among which the European institutions.

After the US event which popularized the digital use of politics, the European Parliament was the first EU institution that created its social media accounts for the EP 2009 election campaign.¹⁹ Since then, European institutions' activity on social media has expanded, and nowadays, more than 15 European institutions and agencies are digitally functional.²⁰ They are represented on 11 different social networks among which Facebook, Instagram, Twitter et cetera. Each institution has several other accounts. As an example, there are more than 100 accounts maintained by the European Commission, including the accounts of local offices, corporates, specialized departments, subdivisions, and representatives.²¹

Among the EU bodies, the European Commission is the most popular and active on Instagram. The page was created in 2014 with its first public post on February 13, 2014. By March 14, 2021, the page had a total of 4.097 posts and over 573.000 followers.

The EU accounts are not only in English, but in all the EU Member States' languages. This aspect is crucial for enabling citizens to get politically involved and to stay updated with the European institutions' information, considering that some of the users might not have the necessary English skills.

This development has an evident effect on the noticeable increase of citizen engagement on social media. According to Eurostat 2020, 54% of EU citizens aged 16-74 participated in social networks in 2019. In comparison to the 36% calculated in 2011, social network

¹⁷ Michael X. Delli Carpini, "Gen.com: Youth, Civic Engagement, and the New Information Environment," *Political Communication* 17, no. 4 (2000): 341.

¹⁸ Lucia Vesnic-Alujevic, "Young People, Social Media and Engagement," *European View* 12, no. 2 (December 2013): 258.

¹⁹ Eduards Gaušis, "European Institutions on Social Media – Shaping the Notion of European Citizenship," *Economics and Business* 30, no. 1 (2017): 30.

²⁰ *Ibid*, 31.

²¹ EU, "Social Networks," Europa, Accessed March 1, 2020.

participation continues to increase. Among the EU Member States, the highest rate of participation is in Denmark (81%), followed by Belgium (76%), Sweden, and Cyprus (72%). However, the countries on the opposite pole are France and Italy (42%).²² Another similar study conducted by Eurostat unveiled that 56% of the European citizens participated in social networks in 2020.²³

Nevertheless, the growth in citizen engagement does not necessarily have a positive impact on electoral politics. On the contrary, nonelectoral forms of engagement in activities such as petitions and protests continue to flourish.²⁴

Following these key concepts, as well as analyzing and understanding the findings of the research, the hypothesis is that citizens tend to participate on daily political activities on social media and start to resonate more with EU institutions, rather than national governments. More specifically, commenters acknowledge the power of the EU and address their concerns directly to the supranational level.

2.1.1. Role of social media in building and maintaining a European identity & citizenship

How are the European institutions portraying themselves on social media? In order to answer this question, within the humanistic perspective of the thesis, it will be examined whether the institutions are trying to foster European citizenship and by which means.

Introduced by the Treaty of Maastricht in 1992, the concept of EU citizenship comes along with national citizenship and guarantees several new rights, among which the right of access to documents, the right to petition, and the right to vote and stand as a candidate for the EP.²⁵

To establish a Union citizenship that displays part of a sustainable, fair European political and legal order, a shared European identity is needed.²⁶

²² Eurostat, “Are you using social networks?,” Eurostat: Your key to European statistics, June 30, 2020.

²³ Eurostat, “What did we use the internet for in 2020?,” Eurostat: Your key to European statistics, January 26, 2021.

²⁴ James Sloam, “New Voice, Less Equal: The Civic and Political Engagement of Young People in the United States and Europe,” *Comparative Political Studies* 47, no. 5 (April 2014): 663–88.

²⁵ European Commission, “EU CITIZENSHIP REPORT 2010: Dismantling the obstacles to EU citizens’ rights,” Brussels, October 27, 2010.

²⁶ Andreas Follesdal, “A Common European Identity for European Citizenship?” *German Law Journal* 15, no. 5 (2014): 765–75.

The concept of **European identity** was developed at the Copenhagen EC summit and introduced in the EU political agenda in the 1970s, to illustrate the Member States' idea of oneness and common responsibility.²⁷ To make it clearer, European identity gathers more civic than cultural elements; the Member States have their own cultural heritage, but they self-identify with a common political structure, namely common institutions, rules, and rights.²⁸

Richard Bellamy explains that three values contribute to the promotion of EU citizenship, namely the cultivation of a sense of belonging, citizen rights, and political participation.²⁹ Initially, the idea of European citizenship was strongly linked to the symbolic elements which promote the identification with the EU.³⁰ Over time, belonging became a rather subjective concept in comparison with the rights of the European citizens which are enshrined in “the Charter of Fundamental Rights of the European Union (EUCFR), the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), and Article 9 of the Treaty on the European Union.”³¹ Lastly, citizens' participation could not prove long-lasting without a strong sense of belonging and comprehension of EU citizens' rights.³²

Lately, the European Union has been aiming at fostering a transnational European citizenship, by going beyond the values of the EU Member States' citizenships. However, such proposals may have a brush with the pre-existing values of the national citizenships that had been democratically recognized.³³ In this respect, the endeavors of the EU to merge distinct national legislations may be regarded as illegitimate and controversial, especially in the case that these actions are not transparent.³⁴ Therefore, the most tenable option would be to model the EU citizenship as a complement to the national citizenship, rather than a total replacement.³⁵

²⁷ Dimitra Karantzeni and Dimitris G. Gouscos, “eParticipation in the EU: Re-focusing on social media and young citizens for reinforcing European identity,” *Transforming Government: People, Process and Policy* 7, no. 4 (2013): 479.

²⁸ Karantzeni and Gouscos, “eParticipation in the EU,” 479.

²⁹ Richard Bellamy, “Evaluating Union citizenship: belonging, rights and participation within the EU,” *Citizenship Studies* 12, no. 6 (2008): 597.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 601.

³¹ European Parliament, “The citizens of the Union and their rights,” Fact Sheets on the European Union: European Parliament, Accessed February 26, 2021.

³² Bellamy, “Evaluating Union citizenship,” 597.

³³ *Ibid.*, 600.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 609.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 600.

According to Gaušis, active citizenship participation is highly dependent on the acknowledgment of rights. It is, therefore, necessary for the EU institutions to inform citizens about “their rights, obligations, and opportunities.”³⁶ To do so, social media might represent the most suitable channel for engaging and creating networks between citizens and EU institutions.³⁷ Over and above other communication tools, social media has the potential to make EU institutions and decision-making entities more attainable for citizens,³⁸ allowing them to get involved in the European public sphere. In such a manner, social media could “bridge the gap between the citizens and the strict, hierarchical structure of the EU.”³⁹

Considering the absence of European consciousness and the lack of citizen engagement on the European scene in the traditional media, EU institutions decide to turn the spotlight on digital media in order to nourish “citizen accessibility to European mechanisms and procedures” and to develop a European public sphere.⁴⁰

Social media does not only foster a common European identity, but also support for further integration by bringing European citizens together on a Europeanized public sphere, in the case of my thesis, the Europeanized public sphere of the EC’s Instagram page.

2.1.2. A Europeanized public sphere

In order to understand the concept of Europeanization, the public sphere should be defined and understood with regard to the patterns of change and phenomena contributing to such a process.

The polity of the society is determined by the relationship between the state and society and their interaction via the public sphere.⁴¹ Described as “a network for communicating information and points of view,”⁴² the public sphere is an important element of the

³⁶ Gaušis, “European Institutions on Social Media,” 30.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Karantzeni and Gouscos, “eParticipation in the EU,” 484.

⁴⁰ Ibid, 481.

⁴¹ Manuel Castells, “The New Public Sphere: Global Civil Society, Communication Networks, and Global Governance,” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (March 2008): 78.

⁴² Terje Rasmussen, “Internet and the Political Public Sphere,” *Sociology Compass* 8, no. 12 (2014): 1318-1319.

sociopolitical environment, enabling people to become vocal and influencing society's decision-making processes.⁴³

As stated by many scholars, social media became the nucleus of the public sphere.⁴⁴ Therefore, according to Castells, digital networks themselves assemble the public sphere.⁴⁵

In comparison to traditional means of communication, social media is preferable for fostering citizen engagement considering the instant interaction between society and government or other political institutions. In such a context, social media can be defined as “a group of technologies that allow public agencies to foster engagement with citizens and other organizations using the philosophy of Web 2.0.”⁴⁶

Besides the internet, revolutionary phenomena such as globalization and multiculturalism, as well as the large-scale movements of people, ideas, and cultures across borders,⁴⁷ contributed massively to the multiplex interaction of the public sphere elements. Such input is essential for the European Union and this paper in particular.

Habermas points out that the emergence of a pan-European public sphere might solve the deficiency of social integration in the processes of Europeanization.⁴⁸ Other scholars examine whether digital media already worked as a facilitator for the development of the European public sphere.⁴⁹

A general European public sphere, akin to national publics via European media seemed unrealistic.⁵⁰ Generally, public spheres are limited to a national scope considering the European socio-cultural and linguistic diversity, as well as the differences in political

⁴³ Castells, “The New Public Sphere,” 78.

⁴⁴ John B. Thompson, *Political scandal: Power and Visibility in the Media Age*, (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 265-270.; Castells, “The New Public Sphere,” 79.

⁴⁵ Castells, “The New Public Sphere,” 79.

⁴⁶ J. Ignacio Criado, Rodrigo Sandoval-Almazan, J. Ramon Gil-Garcia, “Government Innovation through Social Media,” *Government Information Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (October 2013): 320.

⁴⁷ Jostein Gripsrud, Hallvard Moe, Anders Molander, and Graham Murdock, eds., *The Idea of the Public Sphere: A Reader*, (Lanham, Md: Lexington Books, 2010), xxiv-xxvi.

⁴⁸ Jürgen Habermas, “Warum braucht Europa eine Verfassung?,” *Die Zeit*, June 28, 2001.

⁴⁹ Max Hänska and Stefan Bauchowitz, “Can Social Media Facilitate a European Public Sphere? Transnational Communication and the Europeanization of Twitter during the Eurozone Crisis,” *Social Media + Society*, (April 2019): 1; Homero Gil de Zúñiga, “Toward a European Public Sphere? The Promise and Perils of Modern Democracy in the Age of Digital and Social Media — Introduction,” *International Journal of Communication* 9 (2015): 3153.

⁵⁰ Hänska and Bauchowitz, “Can social media facilitate a European public sphere?,” 2.

systems and media systems, all these factors being at odds with the emergence of a European public sphere.⁵¹

Indeed, in the European context, social media represents the locus for manifestations of the public sphere.⁵² Along these lines, European citizens can easily engage with people from the different EU Member States and exchange ideas, discuss EU political issues and public affairs, as well as come to terms with global matters.⁵³

Interesting to examine for this thesis is the appearance of an online community once Europeanized. Similar to Europeanization which is usually propelled by European events and decisions, Instagram activity is also mostly event-driven, due to the comments and interactions between users.

In one of the case studies conducted by Max Hänska and Stefan Bauchowitz, while analyzing the 2015 online Greek demonstrations against EU's austerity measures and democratic deficit, it was observed that such an occurrence in which the spread of information through social media tools, in this case, a hashtag, enables the launch of a pan-European communication space for citizens to express their complaints.⁵⁴ Undeniably, such an instance of vertical bottom-up Europeanization⁵⁵—social media users criticizing EU issues or decisions—had a great effect on the wider public discourse.⁵⁶ Therefore, such a pan-European example of online activism, in which information immediately becomes viral, is significant to the Europeanized public sphere and public discourse.

Similar occurrences in which EU citizens were directly addressing EU institutions and widely protesting on the European scene were captured in the dataset of this research paper.

All things considered, what can indisputably be assembled from all the studies on the Europeanization of the public sphere and its connection with social media and politics is the constantly evolving influence of the digital environment on political life. During the past years, Web-based media and social media platforms determined the structure and eased the

⁵¹ Anamaria Dutceac Segesten and Michael Bossetta, "The Eurosceptic Europeanization of public spheres: print and social media reactions to the 2014 European Parliament elections," *Comparative European Politics* 17 (2019): 363.

⁵² Claes H. de Vreese, "The EU as a public sphere," *Living Reviews in European Governance* 2, no. 3 (2007): 7.

⁵³ Gil de Zúñiga, "Toward a European Public Sphere?," 3155.

⁵⁴ Hänska and Bauchowitz, "Can social media facilitate a European public sphere?," 7.

⁵⁵ Ruud Koopmans and Jessica Erbe, "Towards a European public sphere? Vertical and horizontal dimensions of Europeanized political communication," *Innovation: The European Journal of Social Science Research* 17, no. 2 (2004): 101.

⁵⁶ Hänska and Bauchowitz, "Can social media facilitate a European public sphere?," 7-8.

dissemination of political content, thus facilitating the instant networking between citizens and governments, the articulation of political beliefs, and online manifestations. Hence, by discussing the content of debates from the EC's Instagram page, distinct patterns of communication are unveiled. Moreover, the citizens' political opinions and concerns, as well as their agendas explain the presence of a Europeanized public sphere.

2.2. Social media and political engagement online

What is political engagement and how is social media contributing to the encouragement of the citizens' digital involvement in political life?

First off, it is indispensable to establish the definition of "political engagement." Besides the electing activity or the direct action of influencing decision-makers and pushing them to respond,⁵⁷ there are some other activities such as the participation in social and political movements which add meaning to the definition. Uhlaner explains that engagement implies voluntary actions such as the organization of a political campaign, protests, the creation of networks that gather people with the same interests and goals.⁵⁸ However, being politically engaged does not only refer to taking concrete action, but also to being politically interested and informed.⁵⁹

Over the past 20 years, the effects of digital media on citizen engagement were extensively researched and examined by many scholars. In the 2000s, the authors of a research paper dealing with the influences of the different patterns of Internet usage on social capital contended that being highly exposed to public affairs information on the Internet might have a positive impact on the citizens' political knowledge, as well as on their raise of awareness of certain political occurrences and critical issues and the enhancement of civic interest and political engagement.⁶⁰ The term "social capital," popularised by Robert Putnam, refers to

⁵⁷ Sidney Verba, Kay Lehman Schlozman, Henry E. Brandy, eds., *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1995), 37.

⁵⁸ C. J. Uhlaner, "Participation: Political", *International Encyclopedia of the Social & Behavioral Sciences* (2001): 11078.

⁵⁹ Sidney Verba, Nancy Burns, Kay Lehman Schlozman, "Knowing and Caring about Politics: Gender and Political Engagement," *The Journal of Politics* 59, no. 4 (1997): 1057.

⁶⁰ Marko M. Skoric and Qinfeng Zhu, Debbie Goh and Natalie Pang, "Social Media and Citizen Engagement: A Meta-Analytic Review," *New Media & Society* 18, no. 9 (October 2016): 1818.

the “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.”⁶¹

Lately, social media has become an essential tool for the political engagement of citizens. The involvement and interaction with like-minded citizens on social media result in a tendency to develop an interest and even participate in politics.⁶² Bypassing traditional media—radio, TV, newspapers, magazines⁶³—and exclusively making use of social media, facilitated political engagement and boosted mutually beneficial relationships.⁶⁴ Besides, social media engagement might have a strong impact on the governments, thus influencing their political decisions.⁶⁵

With the introduction of social media platforms in the early 2000s,⁶⁶ social platforms have contributed as the missing puzzle piece to the integrity of daily life. While many platforms are aiming at endorsing citizens’ pre-existing connections, several others support the connection between strangers based on their political views and interests.⁶⁷

One common theme in the research on political engagement online is to explore whether online engagement in the digital ecosystem spills over to offline engagement.⁶⁸ Among scholars, opinions are divided, thus creating two opposing groups. In a study conducted by Valenzuela, it was found that social media platforms do not necessarily have to mirror their contribution to citizens’ political engagement into the offline environment in order to prove successful.⁶⁹ On the other hand, many scholars outline the positive relationship between online and offline engagement. In his meta-analytical review, Skoric demonstrates the beneficial relationship between social media and engagement, including its three

⁶¹ Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000): 19.

⁶² Abreham Getachew and Tibebe Beshah, “The Role of Social Media in Citizen’s Political Participation,” in *ICT, Unbounded, Social Impact of Bright ICT Adoption: IFIP WG 8.6 International Conference on Transfer and Diffusion of IT, TDIT 2019, Accra, Ghana, June 21-22, 2019, Proceedings* (Springer International Publishing: 2019), 487.

⁶³ Marcus Messner and Marcia Watson Distaso, “THE SOURCE CYCLE,” *Journalism Studies* 9, no. 3 (2008): 447.

⁶⁴ Getachew and Beshah, “The Role of Social Media in Citizen’s Political Participation,” 487.

⁶⁵ Skoric et al., “Social media and citizen engagement,” 1824.

⁶⁶ Esteban Ortiz-Ospina, “The rise of social media,” *Our World in Data*, September 18, 2019.

⁶⁷ danah m. boyd and Nicole B. Ellison, “Social Network Sites: Definition, History and Scholarship,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 13 (2008): 210. doi: 10.1111/j.1083-6101.2007.00393.x.

⁶⁸ Sara Vissers and Dietlind Stolle, “Spill-Over Effects Between Facebook and On/Offline Political Participation? Evidence from a Two-Wave Panel Study,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 11, no. 3 (2014): 268.

⁶⁹ Sebastian Valenzuela, Namsu Park and Kerk F. Kee, “Is There Social Capital in a Social Network Site?: Facebook Use and College Students’ Life Satisfaction, Trust, and Participation,” *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 14 (2009): 879.

subcategories: “social capital, civic and political engagement.”⁷⁰ A similar result was spotted by Leticia Bode who explains that the use of social media platforms promotes “personalized information, initiates community engagement and generates social capital.”⁷¹ The features presented by Bode left their mark on political engagement during the 2008 election. The idea of online political engagement being translated into offline political engagement⁷² has also been revealed by Bond in a study where he outlined the positive influence of citizen engagement on voter turnout.⁷³

The digital revolution is thus described by many not as a challenge for democracy, but as a way of disregarding the traditional political institutions for expressing one’s political preferences more creatively and innovatively, as well as achieving one’s civic and political objectives.⁷⁴ What is regarded as an expressive (‘non-institutional’) form of political engagement is usually labeled as “protests, petitions, boycotts and online modes of engagement such as social media campaigns.”⁷⁵

Portrayed as a “democratic Phoenix,”⁷⁶ the emergence of these new voices contributes to the perpetuation and the adaptation of traditional political activism to the digital era, in which peripheral groups not only verbalize their beliefs and concerns, but also “lobby for change in civic, political, cultural and social spheres.”⁷⁷

Following the theories of political participation online which validated a connection between political engagement in the form of written comments on digital platforms and the reshaping of traditional political activism to the virtual space, it is expected that the EC’s Instagram page witnesses signs of activism. In addition, it seems that the activist commenters resonate with the EC as a result of the EU institution’s progressive view.

⁷⁰ Skoric et al., “Social media and citizen engagement”, 1818.

⁷¹ Leticia Bode, “Facebooking It to the Polls: A Study in Online Social Networking and Political Behavior,” *Journal of Information Technology & Politics* 9, no.4 (2012): 352.

⁷² Bode, “Facebooking It to the Polls,” 365.

⁷³ Robert M. Bond, Christopher J. Fariss, Jason J. Jones, Adam D. I. Kramer, Cameron Marlow, Jaime E. Settle, and James H. Fowler, “A 61-million-person experiment in social influence and political mobilization,” *Nature* 489, no. 7514 (2012): 295.

⁷⁴ Avril Keating and Gabriella Melis, “Social media and youth political engagement: Preaching to the converted or providing a new voice for youth?,” *The British Journal of Politics and International Relations* 19, no. 4 (2017): 878.

⁷⁵ Ibid, 879.

⁷⁶ Pippa Norris, *Democratic Phoenix: Reinventing Political Activism* (New York, NY: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

⁷⁷ Keating and Melis, “Social media and youth political engagement,” 879.

However, political engagement online and its expressive forms cannot be fully grasped without being linked to the concept of digital political activism.

2.3. Defining digital political activism

Activism is the dialogue between communities and governments in which the citizens aim at being more reflective and fighting for legitimacy in order to shape more functional regulations.⁷⁸ Thus, by being able to vocalize their perspectives, activists can contribute to the development and resolution of issues that society is facing.⁷⁹ Along with many interdependent global issues, there is a broad spectrum of economic and environmental concerns, violation of rights, and climate change.⁸⁰

Much contemporary activism still echoes the traditional political action with large groups joining massive movements in which they use diverse strategies such as street protests, lobbying, and litigation.⁸¹

However, with the development of the digital landscape, Web 2.0 tools, and social media—representing the public arena—became increasingly crucial for political and social activism, highly influencing decision-making processes and facilitating a much easier creation of networks between citizens, governments, political and social actors.⁸²

Many scholars admitted that “the social media revolution”⁸³ was identified as a result of the Arab Spring and the upsprings⁸⁴ which contributed to significant changes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran.⁸⁵ During the early days of the Arab upsprings when activists started to louden their pressures, social networking platforms “seized the opportunity to brand themselves as

⁷⁸ Robert L. Heath and Damion Waymer, “Activist Public Relations and the Paradox of the Positive: A Case Study of Frederick Douglass’ “Fourth of July Address,” in *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations II*, ed. Robert L. Heath, Elizabeth L. Toth, Damion Waymer (New York and Abingdon: Routledge, 2009), 201.

⁷⁹ Michael F. Smith and Denise P. Ferguson, “Activism 2.0,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Public Relations*, ed. Robert L. Heath (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2010), 396.

⁸⁰ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 5.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸² Rodrigo Sandoval-Almazan and J. Ramon Gil-Garcia, “Towards cyberactivism 2.0? Understanding the use of social media and other information technologies for political activism and social movements,” *Government Information Quarterly* 31, no. 3 (July 2014): 365.

⁸³ Francesca Comunello and Giuseppe Anzera, “Will the revolution be tweeted? A conceptual framework for understanding the social media and the Arab Spring,” *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 4 (2012): 453.

⁸⁴ Tim Markham, “Social Media, Protest Cultures and Political Subjectivities of the Arab Spring,” *Media, Culture & Society* 36, no. 1 (January 2014): 90.

⁸⁵ Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, “Towards cyberactivism 2.0?,” 365.

platforms for political activism and resistance.”⁸⁶ However, these movements are not avant-garde. These mobilizations in which activists sow the seeds of “the family of multi-issue, multi-arena, multi-target, shape-shifting protests”⁸⁷ may have their roots in 1999 at least, when, during the “Battle of Seattle,” activists ceased the activity of the World Trade Organization.⁸⁸

Nowadays, the internet and Web 2.0 technologies represent the ideal complement for social movements, allowing citizens to protest and fight for their beliefs in different ways. Therefore, massive street protests were replaced during the last decades by what is called “cyberactivism.”⁸⁹ Since 2020, this tendency has been even more amplified by the ongoing pandemic.

Over time, major events and pivoting decisions taken by governments explained the paramount significance of social media platforms and Web technologies tools for political activism and social movements.⁹⁰ In a study by Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, it was illustrated that social media tools and applications contributed to the introduction of a new concept in the literature, namely “cyberactivism 2.0.”⁹¹ The term is conceptualized as digital activism in which social media, such as Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter, represents the key tool for facilitating the communication and the creation of networks, as well as the immediate dissemination of information to larger audiences.⁹² The benefits of such mobilizations are mostly related to the constant flow of data, the permanent online engagement, the exchange of user-generated content, and interaction with other citizens.⁹³

2.3.1. Connective action

On the same note, Bennett and Segerberg differentiate between the traditional mobilizations, described by them as “collective action,” and “connective action”⁹⁴ which orbits around the use of social media. Nevertheless, the most distinguishable characteristic of “connective

⁸⁶ Haythem Guesmi, “The social media myth about the Arab Spring,” *Aljazeera*, January 27, 2021

⁸⁷ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 4.

⁸⁸ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 4.

⁸⁹ Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, “Towards cyberactivism 2.0?,” 366.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² *Ibid.*, 367.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 368.

⁹⁴ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 1.

action” is not linked to the rapid spread of information online, but the facilitation of “personalized”⁹⁵ public engagement.

In order to understand **the logic of connective action**, Bennett and Segerberg proposed a three pillar-analysis focusing on the significance of personalized politics for political activism, communication as a fundamental part of citizen engagement, and the differences between collective and connective action.⁹⁶

To begin with, globalization led to the disconnection of individuals from the integrative organizations of modern society, including party union, church, and the traditional family.⁹⁷ This way, the group of citizens tends to be willing to forge connections with others having the same ideals in order to experience and resist common interests and political concerns. However, to understand the collective action through social media, it is necessary to acknowledge individualized behaviors and the importance of using scalable social media platforms for collecting personalized actions.⁹⁸

Content and its circulation have always been examined by scholars in order to understand the mechanisms of actions. In the case of connective action, “personal action frames” are either created by organizations, thus facilitating access, or appear from crowds and then spread rapidly.⁹⁹ One example of such protest in which manifesters utter their personalized concerns is witnessed in the 2011 US Occupy protests. Connective action is coordinated by the use of inclusive slogans such as “What is our one demand?”—in which personal demands, “change”, “end American imperialism”, “end joblessness”, were crammed on social media channels—or “We Are the 99%.”¹⁰⁰

Moving on, the second pillar of the study concerns communication in contentious action. Apropos of digitally networked actions, the “communication as an organization” concept might play an important role, by either replacing or complementing the collective action.¹⁰¹

At the core of the study, and based on the importance of the two above-mentioned themes, lies the framework which presents the differential organizational logic of the protests.¹⁰²

⁹⁵ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 5.

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Ibid, 6.

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 7.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 8.

¹⁰² Ibid, 10.

Based on how networks use social media for resisting their demands and concerns, two different forms of organizations have been distinguished: “organizationally brokered” networks—focusing on the collective identity of protests—and “organizationally enabled” networks—focusing on the manifesters’ individual preferences.¹⁰³

When it comes to contemporary digital activism, Bennett and Segerberg identify three types of action:

- (1) “Organizationally brokered collective action” in which, for example, a political party or strong organizations encourage citizens to take action in pursuit of a particular goal under a collective identity. Social media does not play an essential role in the logic of participation or organization of the protests.
- (2) “Organizationally enabled connective action” in which loosely linked coalitions or individuals stimulate the individualized citizen engagement. Digital media is essential for enabling protesters to become vocal, share their beliefs, and fight for their grievances.
- (3) “Crowd-enabled connective action” refers to the considerable networks of individuals in which social media platforms are crucial for visibility and scalability. Both media and individuals play an important role in initiating dynamic organizations in which crowds provide information and support, react to external events, and fight for change.¹⁰⁴

Based on digital activism and Bennett and Segerberg’s theories, this thesis is expected to examine the connective demonstrations that take place on the European Commission’s Instagram page and understand whether the platform is a locus for citizen activism and who the people engaging are. Also, Bennett and Segerberg’s theory is required for understanding how contemporary society is using social media tools.

3. Methodology and data selection

This chapter is divided into 4 sections, outlining the methodological approach of the dissertation. The study embraces an interdisciplinary approach, employing traditional methodologies from both the world of humanities and the world of social sciences.

¹⁰³ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 11.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid*, 13.

3.1.Context

The present study covers the period between July 1, 2020, and September 30, 2020. During this time span, a total of 191 posts were collected with an average of 70 comments per post. However, the standard deviation of this result is quite high, with numerous posts receiving only few reactions and a bunch of other posts engaging more people and thus, getting more comments.

A series of events marked these three months, out of which some of them were very relevant for the socio-political landscape of both the EU and global scenes, thus potentially influencing the results of the research.

The first noteworthy event during this period, which influenced the results of the citizens' engagement was, undoubtedly, the ongoing pandemic. However, there is something in particular that caught people's attention, namely the travel bans connected to COVID-19. "Love Is Not Tourism" is a movement committed to getting back together all the unmarried binational couples and families who got separated by travel restrictions during the pandemic outbreaks.¹⁰⁵ The movement urges worldwide governments to implement exemptions that will allow these groups of people to reunite while following the essential rules such as getting tested and being in a 14 day-quarantine. The supporters of this movement protest under the following slogans: #LoveIsNotTourism and #LoveIsEssential. The campaign proved to be massive, gathering together people all over the globe calling on fair rights. The protest has crucial effects on the results of the research, with a strong engagement of the citizens regardless of the topic of the European Commission's post with its peak in July, but with continuous participation, however a decreasing one, throughout the whole period of data collection.

Continuing with decisions concerning human rights, another event that changed the natural course of things was the constitutional amendment proposed on July 4, 2020, by Andrzej Duda, the President of Poland, which strived for forbidding the adoption of children by same-sex couples.¹⁰⁶ People supporting LGBTIQ+ rights and a great number of activists got outraged by the decision that was about to limit the freedom of choice of gay couples in Poland. The European Commission's posts discussed LGBTIQ+ rights in general without specifically mentioning the Polish matter. Scandalized citizens asked for the help of the

¹⁰⁵ "Love is Not Tourism," Love is Not Tourism.

¹⁰⁶ Agence France-Presse, "Poland's president plans to forbid adoption by same-sex couples," *The Guardian*, July 4, 2020.

European Union in the comment section of some of their posts in which the idea of #LoveisLove was promoted: “every person in Europe is free to be who they are, live where they like, love who they want and aim as high as they want.”¹⁰⁷

July was an eventful month not only in the European Union, but also on a global level. The actions have important outcomes on citizens’ engagement. The Nagorno-Karabakh conflict represented such an occurrence. The landlocked region in the South Caucasus emerged as a separatist territory while Armenia and Azerbaijan were struggling for sovereignty during the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The region is “a 4,400 km² ethnically Armenian enclave within Azerbaijan, internationally recognized as being Azerbaijani.”¹⁰⁸ Little has been done since the brutal war which ended with a ceasefire in 1994. Throughout this period, there were few military clashes between the two sides, but the conflict which ignited in 2020 is said to be the most serious one to date since then.¹⁰⁹ In an interview with Kamal Makili-Aliyev—an Affiliated Researcher at Raoul Wallenberg Institute for Human Rights and Humanitarian Law in Lund, and a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Global Political Studies at Malmö University—for THE PERSPECTIVE Magazine, the print publication of The Association of Foreign Affairs (UPF), it was explained that “the tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan sparked in August 2019, when Nikol Pashinyan, the Prime Minister of Armenia, proclaimed that ‘Artsakh is Armenia, and that’s it.’ to the public in Armenia and Nagorno-Karabakh.”¹¹⁰ This was believed to be one of the reasons which led to the armed hostilities that broke out in July 2020.

Therefore, protesters publicly demanded the international community from the European Commission’s Instagram page to react and condemn the aggressions happening on the historic lands of Nagorno Karabakh.

Similarly, after the arrest of Sergei Furgal, Russian street protesters were joined by demonstrators on social media in support of the governor of Khabarovsk.¹¹¹ According to Reuters, Furgal was being held in Moscow due to the alleged involvement in multiple murders 15 years ago.¹¹² Thus, numerous activists asked for the help of the European

¹⁰⁷ @europeancommission, “Freedom to love is freedom to live.” *Instagram*, August 4, 2020.

¹⁰⁸ Theodora-Cristina Canciu, “Nagorno Karabakh: The (Un)Resolved Dispute Between Azerbaijan and Armenia,” *The Perspective Magazine*, no. 1 (January 29, 2021): 67.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹¹ “Sergei Furgal: Fresh protests in Khabarovsk over governor’s arrest,” *BBC*, July 18, 2020.

¹¹² Reuters Staff, “Russian city marches in support of detained regional governor,” *Reuters*, July 11, 2020.

Commission to stop the lawlessness and violation of human rights in Russia and save the political prisoners.

Other events that marked July 2020 include Belarusian protests in which the central election commission rejected the registration of Viktor Babariko and Valery Tsepkalo, Alexander Lukashenko's main rivals.¹¹³ A similar political episode in which the rule of law was violated took place in Bulgaria after the Bulgarian Prime Minister Boyko Borissov's government survived a no-confidence vote in parliament during anti-corruption protests.¹¹⁴

A month later, in August 2020, an exit poll conducted by a pro-government organization foresaw a "walkover" for Alexander Lukashenko, winning 79.9% of the votes. His rivalry, Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, targeting at challenging the authoritarian president, was defeated by rigged elections, according to BBC.¹¹⁵ Activists and supporters of the opposition got engaged on the European Commission's Instagram page striving to fight for democracy and transparent elections. The protests were said to be "the country's biggest opposition demonstrations in years."¹¹⁶

And yet there was another event that captured the interests of both the European Union and the commenters—the Beirut explosion. The catastrophe, produced by highly explosive materials stored in a warehouse, ended several dozen lives in the Lebanese capital.¹¹⁷ The European Union has immediately responded to this tragedy and Janez Lenarčič, Commissioner for Crisis Management, declared in a statement that the EU will "offer its full support to the Lebanese people."¹¹⁸ Besides, the EU supported the Lebanese authorities in assessing the extent of the damage, by operating the Copernicus Satellite mapping system. However, despite the colossal global support, including emergency supplies and funding, the citizens displayed their indignation about the injustice and corruption of the country's ruling elite who refused to give people access to money.¹¹⁹ Therefore, a vast percentage of the comments written in August were addressed to this issue; activists and supporters trying

¹¹³ Andrei Makhovsky, "Hundreds protest in Belarus after two main challengers barred from election ballot," *Reuters*, July 14, 2020.

¹¹⁴ Tsvetelia Tsoleva, "Bulgarian government survives no-confidence vote, protests continue," *Reuters*, July 21, 2020.

¹¹⁵ "Belarus election: President Lukashenko set to claim landslide win," *BBC*, August 9, 2020.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ "Beirut blast: Dozens dead and thousands injured, health minister says," *BBC*, August 5, 2020.

¹¹⁸ "Statement by Commissioner Janez Lenarčič on the explosion in Beirut, Lebanon," European Commission, August 5, 2020.

¹¹⁹ Ben Hubbard and Mona El-Naggar, "Clashes Erupt in Beirut at Blast Protest as Lebanon's Anger Boils Over," *The New York Times*, August 8, 2020.

to guide people to directly send humanitarian aid and donate to NGOs and Red Cross organizations, instead of contributing to the corrupt system.

In September, the citizen engagement was fueled by the blaze at the Mória, Reception & Identification Centre on the Greek island of Lesbos which took place on September 9, 2020. The destruction of Europe's largest refugee camp left 13,000 migrants without shelter.¹²⁰ In a statement given by the European Commission's President, Ursula von der Leyen, it was communicated that the EU would step up "to provide support to the migrants who were left without shelter, and to Greece."¹²¹ This humanitarian catastrophe added to something already existent, that activists would call an injustice. In April 2020, demonstrators were asking the EU to confront the pandemic in the unit and to evacuate overcrowded camps such as Mória, in order to prevent the COVID-19 catastrophe. #LeaveNoOneBehind petition's core objective was to raise awareness and exert political pressure so that 20,000 people living in a place built to accommodate only 3,000 people would be evacuated and supported.¹²²

Some other topics that nourished the engagement of citizens were mainly oriented towards Islamism, climate change, Euroscepticism, economy, EU external actions, #AskThePresident campaign, and State of the Union speech (SOTEU).

Both the EU external actions—in which a strategic partnership with India was agreed on in July and a trade agreement with Vietnam was signed in August—and the EU Humanitarian Air Bridge initiative which supported the delivery of humanitarian aid to countries affected by the pandemic were strongly criticized. The majority of people were angered by the EU's unity and solidarity with other countries instead of focusing on its losses and issues. However, in the case of the two partnerships, commenters were not promoting the European decisions, condemning historic events, for example, the Kashmir conflict was brought into discussion when the European Commission presented the partnership with India. On the other hand, the authoritarian regime of Vietnam was deeply attacked as soon as the EC announced the trade agreement.

Besides, the #AskThePresident campaign was an initiative that involved different kinds of reactions: both positive and negative. The commenters were either interested in asking

¹²⁰ "Moria migrants: Fire destroys Greek camp leaving 13,000 without shelter," *BBC*, September 9, 2020.

¹²¹ European Commission, *Migration: A European taskforce to resolve emergency situation on Lesbos*, Brussels, September 23, 2020.

¹²² #LeaveNoOneBehind, "#LeaveNoOneBehind: Prevent the Corona catastrophe now – also at the external borders!," Change.

questions about the future of multilingualism in the EU, regulations on the health system in the EU, and the Green Deal or irritated by issues such as terrorism, Brexit, migrants, or any of the above-mentioned events. The campaign aimed at direct interaction—in the form of Q & A—of the citizens with Ursula von der Leyen. People could address any of their curiosities in any of the European Union’s official languages and subsequently, some of their questions were answered by von der Leyen in a short video.

Last but not least, September 16, 2020, represented a key day for the European Union because Ursula von der Leyen, the President of the European Commission, delivered her first SOTEU speech in front of the European Parliament. During this pivotal event, important priorities concerning the recovery after the pandemic, the Green Deal, and the “digital decade” were delivered.¹²³ Taking into consideration that multiple initiatives and ideas concerning the future of the EU were discussed, SOTEU set the stage for the discussion in the comment threads.

3.2. Data collection

This section of the chapter defines the data selection process. The textual data in the form of written comments extracted from the EC’s official Instagram account represents the core of the paper. Firstly, the importance of data gathering from social media platforms for the purpose of research in the field of humanities will be discussed. This will set the stage for a discussion about Instagram and its “digital architecture.”¹²⁴ It will then continue with an elaborative review of the sampling process from the official Instagram page of the EC. The section will conclude with some ethical considerations for collecting data for content analysis purposes and will set the general limitations of the paper.

3.2.1. Data collection through Instagram

Humanities researchers see social media as a research room, imparting valuable information and helping to test theories not only about intercommunication, but also about economic,

¹²³ European Commission, *State of the Union Address by President von der Leyen at the European Parliament Plenary*, Brussels, September 16, 2020. Accessed March 6, 2021.

¹²⁴ Michael, Bossetta, “The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Comparing Political Campaigning on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat in the 2016 U.S. Election.” *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 95, no. 2 (June 2018): 471–96.

political, and societal outcomes.¹²⁵ They aim at exploring the effects of social media platforms and their use on social phenomena such as activism, political engagement, and voter turnout.¹²⁶

Described by its creators as the ideal place “to offer personalized opportunities to create, connect, communicate, and share”, as well as to foster “a positive, inclusive and safe environment,”¹²⁷ Instagram is known as one of the most popular visual social media platforms in the world. What differentiates Instagram the most from other platforms such as Facebook and Twitter, is without any doubt its appeal to young adult users.¹²⁸

Since its launch in October 2010, the platform has seen rapid growth in the number of monthly active users. As of January 2021, Statista placed Instagram as the fifth most used network worldwide, with a total of over a billion active users.¹²⁹

The platform is centered around rich data that combines visual imagery with captions, hashtags, and comments.

In comparison with Twitter which is more tailor-made for the comprehension of “public opinion or discourse around a current event,”¹³⁰ Instagram appears better suited for understanding personalized content, virtual communities, and daily lives as witnessed by camera lenses.¹³¹ Moreover, while hashtags on Twitter are mainly used for categorization, it was shown that Instagram hashtags intend to build networks and to provide information.¹³²

A study by Hitlin and Holcomb (2015) of the Pew Research Center¹³³ discussed the #Ferguson conversation—after the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson—by analyzing the engagement both on Instagram and Twitter. It was stated that 86% of the Twitter participation using the above-mentioned hashtag was referring to something related to the news such as movements, the U.S. Department of Justice report, or Ferguson's police

¹²⁵ Anabel Quan-Haase and Lori McCay-Peet, “Building Interdisciplinary Social Media Research Team: Motivations, Challenges, and Policy Frameworks,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, ed. Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publishing, 2017): 48-49.

¹²⁶ Quan-Haase and McCay-Peet, “Building Interdisciplinary Social Media Research Team,” 48.

¹²⁷ *Terms of Use*, Instagram, (December 20, 2020).

¹²⁸ John H. Parmelee and Natalyia Roman, “Insta echoes: Selective exposure and selective avoidance on Instagram,” *Telematics and Informatics* 52, no. 101432 (September 2020): 2.

¹²⁹ “Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2021, ranked by number of active users,” Statista, January 2021.

¹³⁰ Linnea Laestadius, “Instagram,” in *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods*, ed. Luke Sloan and Anabel Quan-Haase (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publishing, 2017): 576.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*

¹³² *Ibid.*

¹³³ *Ibid.*

department.¹³⁴ Opposing to this, Instagram users were mainly addressing activist statements. Only 38% of the posts were directly related to the event and its aftermaths, whereas the rest of the 62% were mainly referring to broader issues such as civil rights and racism.¹³⁵

3.2.2. Instagram as a site of research

What are the characteristics outlined by the researchers which make Instagram a laboratory for communication and political experimentation?

Besides the specific features of the platform, there are different “structural affordances”¹³⁶ which allow Instagram to be subject to extensive research.

Boyd (2010) affirms that Instagram affords persistence, thus encouraging its users to capture moments and then share them online.¹³⁷ This characteristic will then contribute to the stable amount of data provided for potential research.

In addition, Instagram is not only scalable, allowing the researchers to make use of the public status of some relevant pages, but also easily replicable, by screen-capturing desirable posts or copy-pasting written content. Its search functionality facilitates the researchers’ work by identifying the relevant content to the topic by easily filtering it by hashtag, username, geotag, et cetera.¹³⁸

Moving to its last affordance, Instagram affords a high degree of interpretability.¹³⁹ Besides the valuable message that stands behind the captions, Instagram users are required to upload visual imageries which then contribute to the richness of data analysis when extracting preferred content, such as comments.

This last characteristic is the most attractive one for this dissertation since it is strongly connected to the interpretation of comments which adds valuable information to the comprehension of user engagement and the effects of the posts on citizens’ behavior.

¹³⁴ Paul Hitlin and Jesse Holcomb, “From Twitter to Instagram, a different #Ferguson conversation,” Pew Research Center, April 6, 2015. Accessed February 24, 2020.

¹³⁵ Hitlin and Holcomb, “From Twitter to Instagram, a different #Ferguson conversation.”

¹³⁶ danah boyd, “Social Network Sites as Networked Publics: Affordances, Dynamics, and Implications.” In *Networked Self: Identity, Community, and Culture on Social Network Sites*, ed. Zizi Papacharissi (New York: Routledge, 2010): 45.

¹³⁷ Ibid, 45-46.

¹³⁸ Ibid, 46-47.

¹³⁹ Laestadius, “Instagram”, 578.

Moreover, interpretability is essential not only for spotting particular trends or patterns, but also for analyzing them in massive data sets.

3.2.3. Ethical considerations

In accordance with the Ethical Guidelines from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee, ethical considerations for the present study were taken into account. No challenges have been encountered, since the dataset was published by the European Commission, which is a public institution, on an open social media platform, namely Instagram. In such a situation, it is essentially acceptable to capture and analyze the content and interactions without consent as long as sensitive data such as commenters' names are excluded or encrypted.¹⁴⁰

Since the research debates politically sensitive content dealing with topics such as ethnicity, minority identity, sexual identity, and political activism, the public identity of the users was not exposed in order to avoid possible harassment and ensure the safety of the citizens.

The Data Policy of Instagram clearly communicates that public Instagram accounts together with their published and shared content, interactions, comments, and username are accessible to anyone and can be freely “seen, accessed, reshared or downloaded.”¹⁴¹

Moreover, the possibility of downloading, resharing, or screenshotting content—comprising comments—of the platform was explicitly explained, even by people or companies outside the audience one shared with.¹⁴² Therefore, consent for data collection is not required because the content is publicly available and it is assumed that the European Commission is aware of these policies. Besides, the study does not reveal any of the commenters' confidential information.

¹⁴⁰ aline shakti franzke, Anja Bechmann, Michael Zimmer, Charles M. Ess, and the Association of Internet Researchers, *Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0.*, (2020), 54-55.

¹⁴¹ *Data Policy*, Instagram, (August 21, 2020).

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

3.3. The official Instagram page of the European Commission: the sampling process

The data selection was made with the awareness and understanding that Instagram is a relatively unexplored, yet valuable, data resource for humanities, particularly within the field of European Studies.

Considering that the EC has official Instagram accounts for all the EU Member States, it was decided that the unit of sampling for this research paper will only include the main Instagram account of the European Commission (@europeancommission).

European Commission is the most popular European institution on Instagram, with a total of over 4.000 posts and up to 573.000 followers.

A report for @europeancommission created by IGBlade.pro—an Instagram analytics tool—tracked from February 13, 2019, until March 24, 2021, revealed that around 80.3% of the page’s audience consists of real people, the rest being mass followers, suspicious accounts, and influencers (see Appendix 1 on page 71). Moreover, based on the geo-data of the audience’s posts, it was found that the most active citizens are of Italian, German, or Belgian origins (see Appendix 2 on page 72). However, interesting to mention is that Poland is also to be found in this list, as a representative of Eastern Europe. All this information, together with the diversity of languages—Italian, Spanish, French, German, Portuguese, excluding English which is the official language of the page (see Appendix 3 on page 71)—contributes to the Europeanization of the public sphere.

Taking into account the visual nature of this social platform, the main digital tools used by the European Commission are posts in the form of images, 10 second-videos, above 10 second-videos (called IGTV), and 24 hour-stories. The data collected for the thesis only consists of feed posts which appear on the feed either as pictures or as short and long videos.

Data selection was deliberately structured so as to identify emerging patterns and concepts which will, subsequently, be essential for answering the research questions.¹⁴³

Data has been gathered solely on Instagram and consists of citizen engagement on the platform in the form of comments. The core objective was to identify civil participation, analyze and understand who is getting involved in the European public sphere and with which agendas they comment.

¹⁴³ Marilyn Domas White and Emily E. Marsh, “Content Analysis: A Flexible Methodology,” *Library Trends* 55, no. 1 (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006): 34.

The content was categorized using the program Microsoft Office Excel. As part of the coding process, each post’s URL was stored together with both the caption and the date of the post and systematically arranged into the Excel sheet (see Appendices 4 & 5 on page 73).

Then, the focus was oriented towards the number of comments and likes/views of the post. And in the end, the last step was dedicated to the actual gathering of comments. Once the basic data was collected, the process continued with preparing the overview of the data which was assembled as follows: the total number of posts, the number of posts per day, the total number of comments, the number of comments per post, the overall number of individual commentators, the number of individual commentators per post and descriptive labeling of topics for each post (see Appendix 6 on page 74).

The analyzed content was manually collected during a period of three months, between July 1, 2020, and September 30, 2020. The period was chosen due to the large volume of data which covered a wide variety of topics that were inductively coded. The final sample included a total of 13.495 user comments—among which only 4.700 (34,8%) represent the category written by individual commenters—associated with 191 posts. All the comments were classified into 13 different topics as displayed in Figure 1. The inductive labeling is derived from the text and grouped at a high level of abstraction.

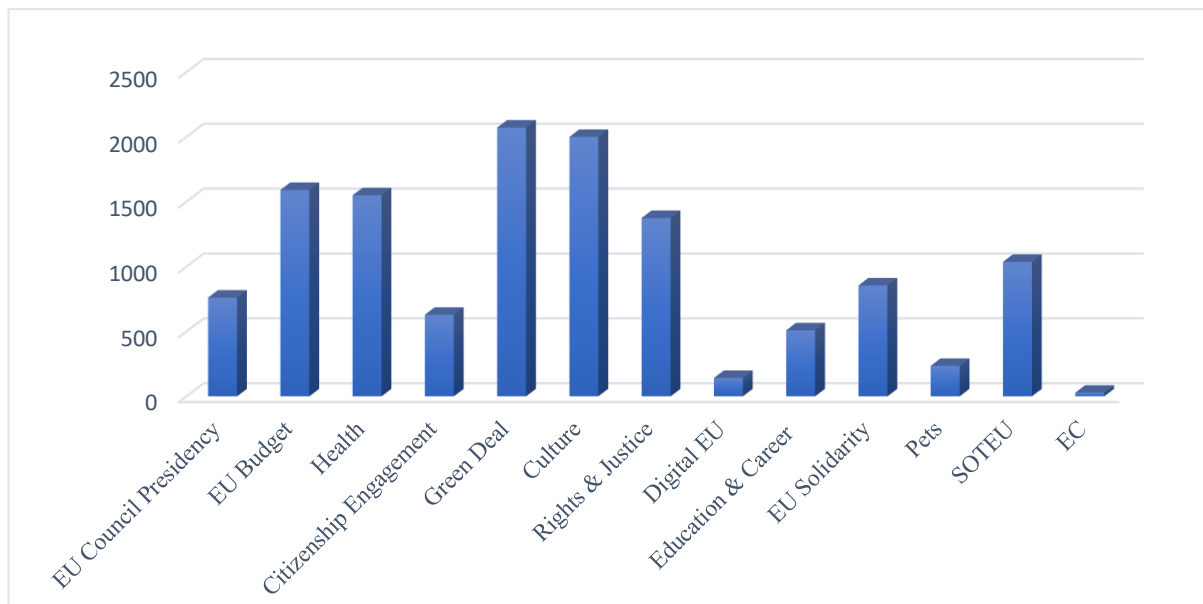


Figure 1 Topics

3.3.1. The context of posts

Regarding the content presented by EC in their posts during these three eventful months, very distinctive topics were detected (see Figure 1).

Besides specific events including some of the ones already mentioned in Subchapter 3.1. on page 18, EC promoted posts about commemorative days such as the death of the Italian composer Ennio Morricone, Member States' national days, the 25th anniversary of the Srebrenica massacre.

In addition, many other posts highlighted the role of the European Commission in some particular areas such as environment, transport, security, justice, et cetera.

However, the post which engaged the highest number of commenters during this period, with a total of 340 comments, was addressed to the European Capital of Innovation 2020, a post in which citizens were asked to predict the winner. The second most popular post (285 comments) was about the European Commission's traineeship and where people interested to follow such a path were being offered the opportunity to ask any questions and concerns regarding the matter. A great number of people got engaged, either by asking questions about the application process itself or by sharing their previous experiences. Many of the queries have been answered by the European Commission's Social Media team. The post that ranks 3rd on the podium (263 comments) dealt with LGBTIQ+. Citizens were either presenting their positive or negative beliefs or they were asking for the EU's intervention, as in the case of Polish people.

3.3.2. Types of comments

In order to understand which types of entities got engaged on the European Commission's Instagram page, the comments were divided into 3 different categories: meaningful comments, meaningless comments, and activist comments (see Appendix 7 on page 74).

In an attempt to check the reliability of the coding process, the consistency of the researcher, and the agreement between independent coders, the same coding scheme consisting of 10% of the dataset was coded by two different people, including the author of this paper. The nominal data coded by the two coders was verified and calculated using ReCal2, a free software designed by Deen Freelon. Therefore, the high intercoder reliability (see Appendix 8 on page 75) ensures the coding validity. The three variables are attributed as follows:

variable one for meaningful comments, variable two for activist comments, and variable three for meaningless comments.

Meaningful public engagement through comments was defined as the direct and relevant response of the users to the caption of the post, to the message transmitted by the visuals, their pertinence to the topic of the posts, or the clear participation with other users on the particular issue initiated by the European Commission. This typology is referred to by Michael Bossetta as “civic.”¹⁴⁴ He explains that the participation is civic inasmuch as the code of behavior is respected, some intention towards the public interest is justified—for example, raising awareness of decarbonization of the energy sector or increasing knowledge about EU external actions—and the communication is not disrupted through acts of verbal violence such as hate speech.¹⁴⁵

Moreover, Springer and colleagues point out that there is deliberative public opinion when people get engaged in reasoned socio-political discussions in an endeavor to find out potential solutions to common issues and to assess them.¹⁴⁶

On the other hand, **meaningless comments** mostly depicted the use of emojis, hashtags, or person-tags, which do not bring any obvious substance to the matter, extraneous questions, or affirmations. Moreover, the potential bots, which tend to write short comments which lack uniqueness,¹⁴⁷ and the promotion of specific website pages are also included in this category of comments. These so-called “trolls,”¹⁴⁸ tend to constantly disrupt discussion threads with off-topic comments.

Finally, the last group is represented by **activist comments**. A wide range of protests, fighting for distinct purposes, such as the Arab Spring, Occupy Wall Street, and the Indignados in Spain, among other social movements, contributed to the empowerment of

¹⁴⁴ Michael Bossetta, *The Digital Architectures of Social Media: Platforms and Participation in Contemporary Politics*. Department of Political Science, University of Copenhagen (2019): 54.

¹⁴⁵ Bossetta, *The Digital Architectures of Social Media*, 54.

¹⁴⁶ Nina Springer, Ines Engelmann, and Christian Pfaffinger, “User comments: motives and inhibitors to write and read,” *Information, Communication & Society* 18, no. 7 (2015): 798-815.

¹⁴⁷ Kim Seungbae and Han Jinyoung, “Detecting Engagement Bots on Social Influencer Marketing,” in *Social Informatics: 12th International Conference, SocInfo2020, Pisa, Italy, October 6-9, 2020, Proceedings*, ed. Samin Aref, Fosca Giannotti, Dino Pedreschi, Frank Dignum, Kalina Bontcheva, Francesco Grisolia, and Marco Braghieri (Springer, 2020), 132.

¹⁴⁸ Bossetta, *The Digital Architectures of Social Media*, 55.

social media both as individual political participation (IPP) and collective activism mediator.¹⁴⁹

The definition was attributed to opinions that brought up several forms of contention into different comparative political or social contexts, locally, nationally, and transnationally.¹⁵⁰ These comments are usually written by individuals facing a common issue and pursuing common resolutions.¹⁵¹

The first step in collecting such data was to identify some particular events which might fuel fulmination (see Subchapter 3.1. on page 18).

Once these events are recognized, the process is quite simple because the users tend to use the traffic directions @ (see Figure 2) and # (see Figure 3) in order to massively circulate their criticism or beliefs on the platform and to easily network with similar entities.



#stoparmenianagression AZ
31w Reply

Figure 2 The use of # on Instagram



@europeancommission you are flooding us with refugees and wonder why people turn to avoid certain races
21w 5 likes Reply

Figure 3 The use of @ on Instagram

3.4. General limitations

Regardless of the valuable insights and information concerning the use of Instagram by the European Commission, few limitations should be addressed.

Instagram is mainly a mobile phone application, but it can also be accessed from a Web browser. Taking into consideration that the data was manually collected, it was easier to make use of the second option, thus being able to copy-paste the necessary content.

However, when using the desktop version, there was an issue with scrolling on Instagram comments. Every time the “+” button for expanding comments was being utilized, instead of loading more comments, the cursor was being sent back to the first comment, thus losing

¹⁴⁹ Velasquez, Alcides, and Robert LaRose. “Youth Collective Activism through Social Media: The Role of Collective Efficacy.” *New Media & Society* 17, no. 6 (June 2015): 899–918.

¹⁵⁰ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 10.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid*, 1.

track of the exact number of selected comments or the last comment which was copied. This issue had effects on the total number of comments, although the deviation was limited.

Nonetheless, these errors were encountered when categorizing the comments into the three different groups: meaningful, activist, meaningless. It was noticed that in the cases of posts with more than 100 comments, some of the comments were being repeated. The obvious repetitions were eliminated in order to get the most accurate possible results.

In addition, it must be pointed out that English is the official language of the EC's Instagram page. This is a general methodological constraint for the research endeavor to observe the possible emergence of a pan-European public sphere.

Last but not least, following the demographic details of the EC Instagram page collected from IGBlade (see Appendix 3 on page 72), English is used in the comment section 57,2% of the time. The rest of the comments are either written in another language (24%) or utilize emojis for the purpose of expressing users' thoughts (18,8%). Only English comments were analyzed for this dissertation. Hence, the language code might represent an impediment to the attempt to gauge a genuinely transnational and European public. This language limitation has also affected the main findings resulting from the content analysis, considering that 42,8% of the content was lost.

4. Results

This dissertation sets off to display the citizens' engagement on the EC's Instagram page by examining the types of comments and the topics of the posts. To better understand whether the international page is an avenue for activism and what elucidates these activist voices and perspectives, engagement both by the topic of the post and by the type of comments were measured. Besides, the overall number of posts and comments per day was calculated and the percentage of occurrence for each type of comment was estimated. All in all, this chapter presents and summarises all the relevant findings of the study with respect to the research questions using descriptive statistics. The study embraces an interdisciplinary approach, employing traditional methodologies from both the world of humanities and the world of social sciences, and combining both quantitative and qualitative methods.

4.1. Number of comments and posts per day

Considering the difference between the number of posts per day, with an average of 2 posts, and the total number of comments per day, with the minimum of 12 comments on September 5, 2020, the design of the graph in a logarithmic scale (see Figure 4 on page 33) was the most convenient option for showing the rate of change over the time.

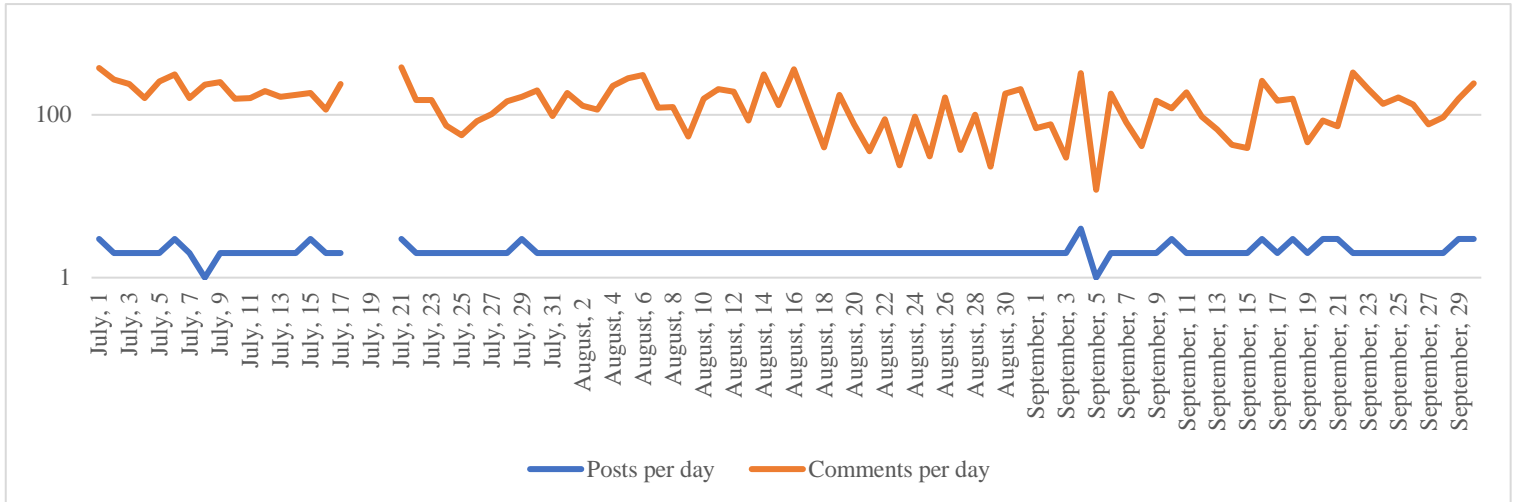


Figure 4 Number of posts and comments per day

The two lines appear disrupted for a period of three days (July 18, 2020-July 20, 2020) when the European Commission did not post anything which obviously resulted in the lack of comments.

4.2. Commenting frequency per day

Used as an at-a-glance reference to the distribution of the data, this frequency diagram helped in identifying the trend in the data set. July 21, 2020, was the date with the most commented posts, reaching a total of 383 comments.

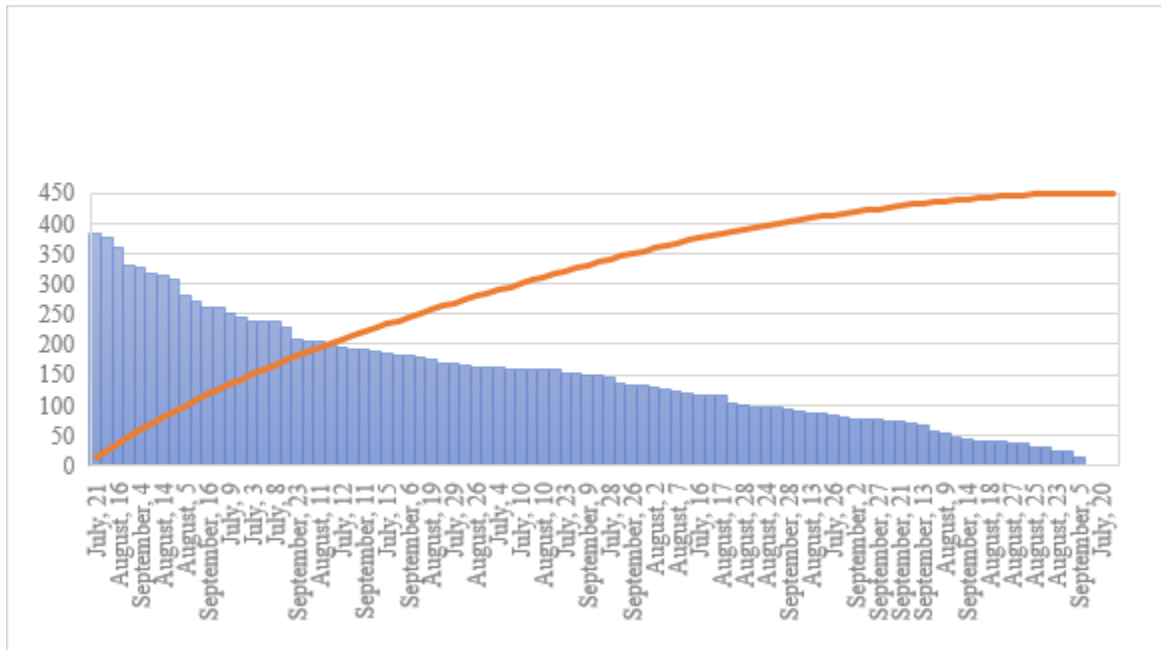


Figure 5 Frequency of comments per day

The Pareto chart helped to visually depict the most significant days. Moreover, the Pareto line illustrates the cumulative total percentage. Therefore, it was discovered that approximately 27 out of the total of 92 posts are responsible for 50% of the overall number of comments. The flattened part of the line towards the end of the graph represents the inconsistency in engagement.

4.3. Engagement by the topic of the post

First off, the posts were categorized by their topic. The chart focuses strictly on citizen engagement according to the different labels of the posts.

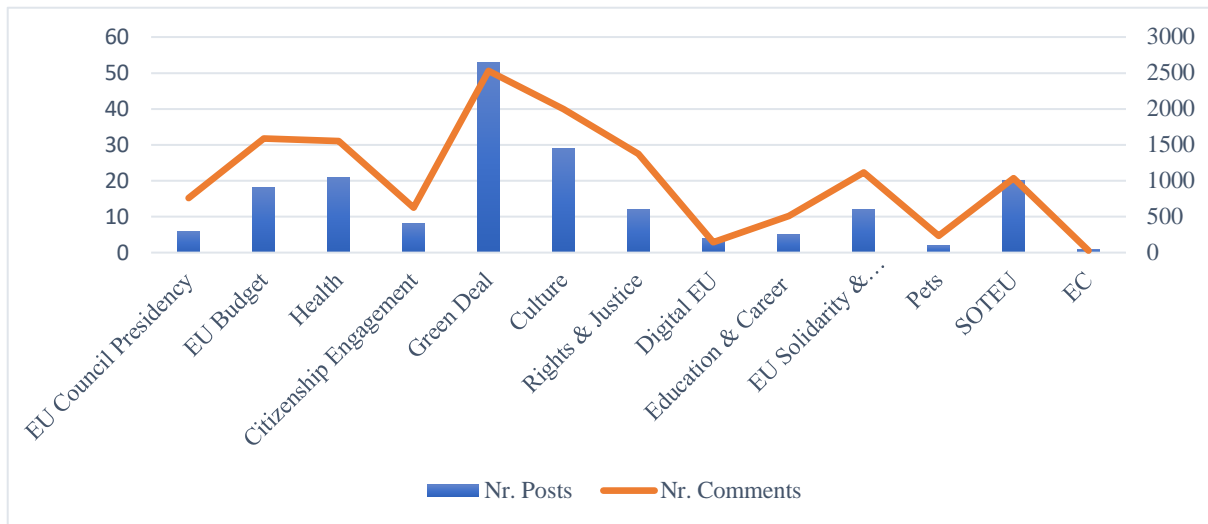


Figure 6 Engagement by the topic of the post

Therefore, the diagram reveals that the number of posts about Green Deal and culture is higher than those about the digital future of the European Union, education and career, as well as pets or the European Commission. On that account, a clear majority participated in posts associated with the dominant topics, whereas the other group of posts did not capture citizens' interest.

However, this was not necessarily a pattern. Considering that the number of posts about SOTEU (20), health (21), and EU budget (18) was almost identical, the number of comments was quite different, with most of the participants being more interested in health (1550) and EU budget (1591) rather than in the remaining topic, SOTEU, where a total of 1073 comments were gathered.

4.4. Occurrence for each type of comment

Moving on, Figure 7 below displays the rate of occurrence for each type of comment, activist comments being the most recurrent, though not significantly different from the other two. What is thought-provoking about this diagram is the resemblance with Figure 8 on page 37 in terms of their overall trend.

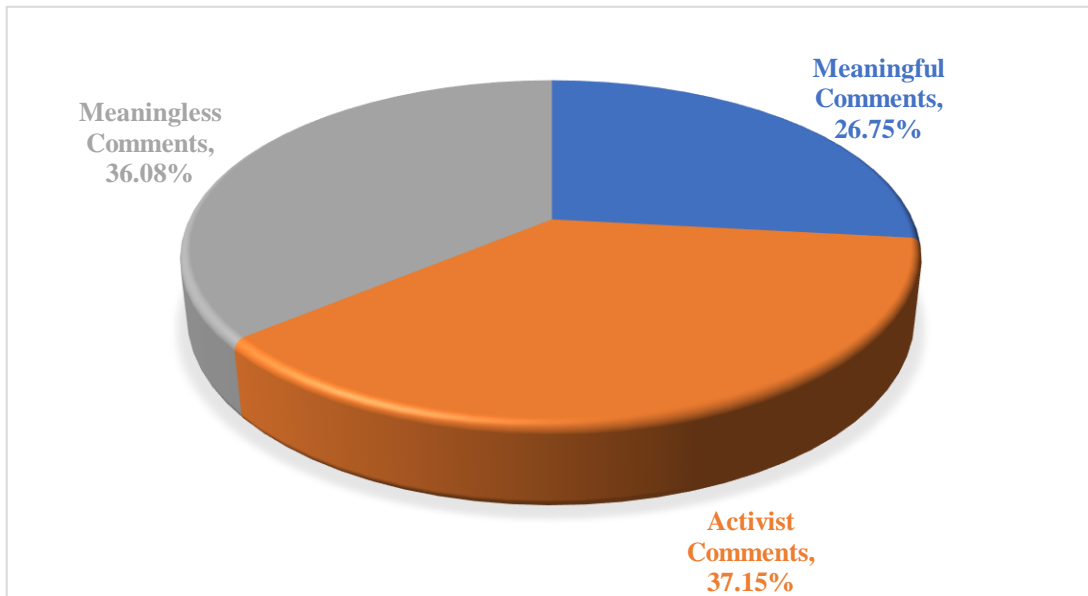


Figure 7 Percentage of occurrence for each type of comment

However, even if the percentages are really similar, the graph does not say much unless expanded into a line diagram so to allow the understanding of the frequency. Will Figure 8 on page 37 preserve the same trend? Will the difference between the comments continue to be so obvious?

4.5. Engagement by the type of comment

As described in the methodology, this thesis defines three different categories of comments: meaningful, meaningless, and activist. The graph below aims at examining the differences in the engagement depending on the type of comments.

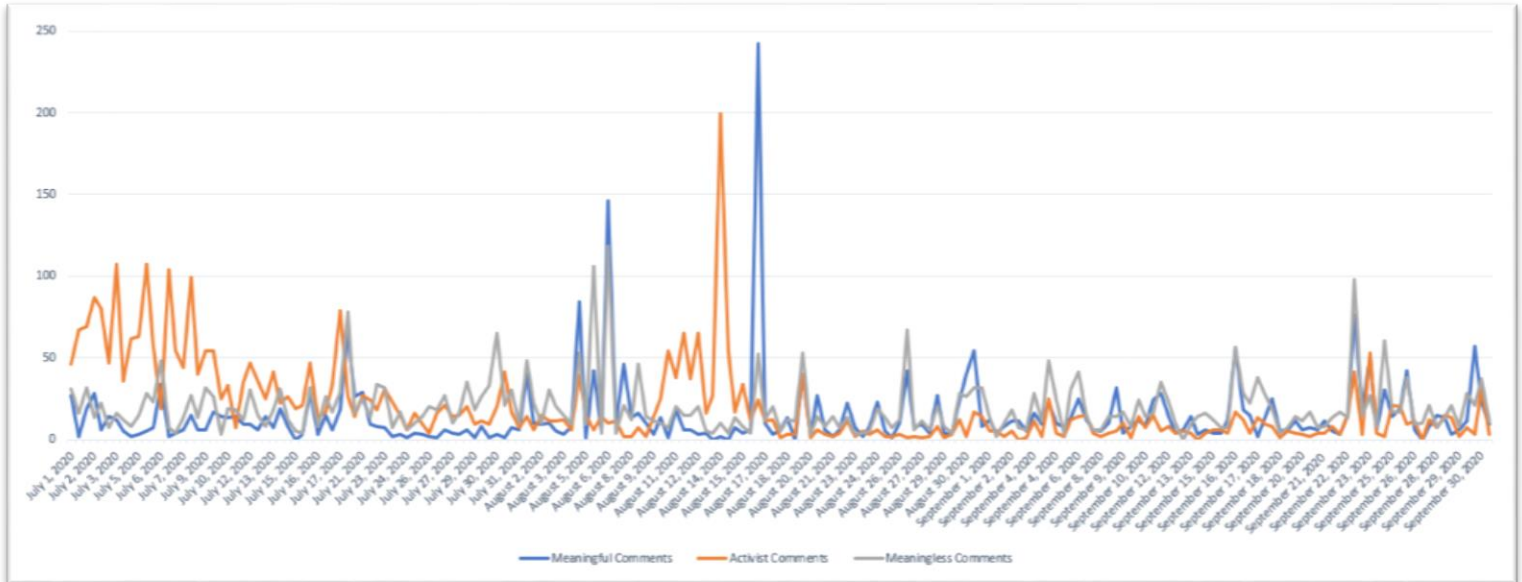


Figure 8 Engagement by the type of comment

Compared to Figure 7, the new diagram explains the different occurrences of the three types according to the date and topic of the post to which participants got engaged.

The peak for meaningful comments, with a total of 242 comments, was spotted on August 16, 2020, when citizens predicted the winner of the 2020 European Capital of Innovation. Commenters participated in the discussion by picking their favorite city out of a total of 12 and arguing for their choice.

The highest number of activist engagement, 199 comments, was observed on August 14, 2020, on a post about Green Deal. Considering the scope of the European initiative, one must believe that all the comments are relevant to the topic. However, striking decisions and events play a part in the dynamics of activism¹⁵² and in this case, overshadow the importance of the European Commission's posts dealing with unrelated topics. This was the situation of

¹⁵² Hedy Grejdanus, Carlos A de Matos Fernandes, Felicity Turner-Zwinkels, Ali Honari, Carla A Roos, Hannes Rosenbusch and Tom Postmes, "The psychology of online activism and social movements: relations between online and offline collective action," *Current Opinion in Psychology* 35 (October 2020): 50.

the above-mentioned post, its significance got obliterated by the massive 2020 Belarusian post-election protests. Therefore, the comments were almost entirely written by activists asking for help for Belarus.

The last category, namely meaningless comments, reached its peak on August 6, after collecting 118 comments on a post dealing with European Commission traineeships. In such a situation, most commenters tagged people who might have been interested in the opportunity or were seeking information.

However, as an example, the second post of September 22, 2020, was even more gripping to be analyzed, considering that all three categories of comments were spiking. What are the factors contributing to such an effect? And why does the topic captured the interest of different commenters?

After checking the database (see Appendix 9 on page 75), it was disclosed that the post deals with strengthening LGBTIQ+ rights. Until March 2021, when the European Parliament declared that the EU is an “LGBTIQ Freedom Zone,” in response to the Polish “LGBTIQ-free zone,”¹⁵³ this matter was not included in the EU prerogatives. Following Ursula von der Leyen’s SOTEU speech about integrating LGBTIQ+ equality in the EU policies,¹⁵⁴ most of the meaningful comments were expressing appreciation and recognition to the European



Figure 9 Post nr. 173 on September 22, 2020

¹⁵³ European Parliament, *Parliament Declares the European Union an “LGBTIQ Freedom Zone,”* March 11, 2021.

¹⁵⁴ European Commission, *Union of Equality: The Commission presents its first-ever strategy on LGBTIQ equality in the EU,* Brussels, November 12, 2020.

Commission for the initiative. However, there were also opponents questioning the decision. On the contrary, activists were mainly fighting against the Polish and Hungarian governments in order to secure LGBTIQ+ rights. In the case of meaningless comments, citizens were either sending rainbow and heart emojis or asking where they could find the European Union & LGBTIQ+ flag pin, displayed in the picture attached to the post (see Figure 9).

The first half of July was indeed engaging for activists (see the orange line in Figure 8 on page 37). But what was the main topic of the comments? Were they following a similar pattern and why were they spiking in comparison with the two other categories of comments?

While the posts were dealing with different topics, the comments were following the same pattern, namely supporting the social media campaign “LoveIsNotTourism” in which activists were asking for a regrouping norm allowing them to reunite with their beloved ones (see Subchapter 3.1. on page 18).

4.6. Comment types within topic categories

To better understand which topics are of most interest for activists, visualizing the engagement of each type of comment according to the topic of the posts was highly essential. Therefore, the next step was to create a graph (see Figure 10), which summarizes the activists’ main interests.

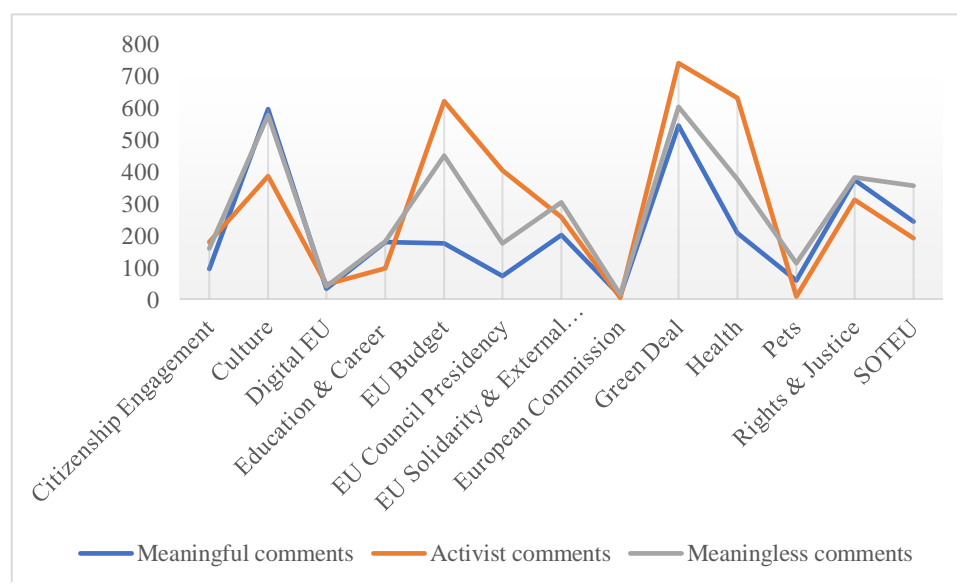


Figure 10 Engagement of each type of comment by the topic of the posts

Following the findings, activist comments were highly predominant on posts dealing with Green Deal (739 comments), health (629 comments), EU budget (620 comments), and EU Council Presidency (403 comments). Also relevant to mention is the fact that Coronavirus posts are incorporated in the field of “Health.”

On the other hand, the digital future of the EU, as well as the European Commission and pets were not the areas of the interest of such commenters.

4.7. Results of the quantitative content analysis

Next, a quantitative content analysis was performed using word clouds or wordles. Word clouds visualize words proportionately to their frequency in the corpus.

Python programming language was used for the creation of the wordles (see Appendix 10 on page 76). The high-frequency words were thus represented by proportionality in a closed space. The final word clouds were pre-processed by removing stop words, i.e. commonly-used words— “I”, “am”, “is”, “be”, “need”, “also”, “already”, “much”, “get”, “know”, et cetera—and collocations, so to avoid the repetition of combinations which might have distorted the final results.

In order to extensively inspect the content, it was decided that the data should first be divided into meaningful and activist comments and analyzed separately for each topic. Then, the two categories of comments of each topic should be scanned together so that a full image of the engagement is generated. In the end, all the data was explored so to see the overall high-frequency words of the research. In total, over 40 different word clouds were produced, required for the comprehension of the different engagements, initiated by the citizens who populate the comment section of the international page.

For this particular investigation, the meaningless comments were excluded because they do not give weight to the results due to their predominant use of emojis and person-tags.

To start with, the overall picture of the engagement according to keywords was scrutinized (see Figure 11 on page 41), before digging into each and every topic. This first wordle depicted the fact that activists represented the group of commenters who left the biggest print during the three months of collected data.

Topic	Meaningful Comments	Activist Comments
Citizenship Engagement	"EU", "question", "Europe", "citizen", "initiative", "thank", "democratic", "one", "president", "#askthepresident"	"EU", "please", "help", "people", "#loveisnottourism", "#loveisessential", "#liftthetravelban", "#doitlikedenmark", "family reunification", "loved ones"
Culture	"European", "language", "national day", "EU", "one", "Valencia", "Milano" "Cluj Napoca", "flag", "people"	"help", "Belarus", "people", "please", "#loveisessential", "#loveisnottourism", "liftthetravelban", "stop", "government", "regime"
Digital EU	"new", "5g", "digital", "technology", "European Commission", "data", "EU", "skills", "access", "thank"	"#loveisnottourism", "#loveisessential", "#allfamiliesmatter", "#liftthetravelban", "reunite", "binational couple", "visa", "border", "#doitlikedenmark", "help"
Education & Career	"apply", "thank", "European Commission", "one", "English", "traineeship", "Erasmus", "application", "degree", "opportunity"	"#loveisnottourism", "us", "#loveisessential", "#liftthetravelban", "unmarried couples", "help", "please", "family reunification visa", "family", "love"
EU Budget	"EU", "European", "people", "one", "together", "work", "money", "proud", "support", "thank"	"please", "#loveisnottourism", "#loveisessential", "help", "#liftthetravelban", "reunite", "family", "open", "help Belarus", "binational couples"
EU Council Presidency	"Europe", "EU", "great", "Croatia", "world", "Germany", "thank", "presidency", "bla", "hope"	"please", "us", "unmarried couple", "#loveisnottourism", "#loveisessential", "#liftthetravelban", "open", "#doitlikedenmark", "binational couple", "family reunification"
EU Solidarity & External Action	"thank", "EU", "help", "people", "Europe", "Lebanon", "support", "Red Cross", "Lebanese", "citizen"	"Belarus", "helpBelarus", "people", "please help", "#loveisnottourism", "violence", "#savepoliticalprisoners", "#stoparmenianaggression", "border", "#liftthetravelban"
European Commission	"congratulations", "McGuinness", "European", "excellent", "impressive", "competent", "public", "thank", "hope", "real"	"world", "nations", "progressive", "colonialism", "plunder", "resources", "degrowth", "exploited", "harmful", "ridiculous"
Green Deal	"EU", "European Commission", "people", "Green Deal", "thank", "plastic", "environment", "planet", "energy", "sustainable"	"Belarus", "helpBelarus", "please", "stop", "innocent people", "scared", "regime", "violence", "praying", "government"
Health	"EU", "people", "one", "citizen", "vaccine", "thank", "countries", "better", "travel", "virus"	"please", "#loveisnottourism", "#loveisessential", "people", "love", "regime", "binational couple", "help", "visa", "stop"
Pets	"EU", "dog", "cat", "passport", "international", "support", "love", "together", "Newton", "Sweden"	"ruling", "outrage", "Christian", "girl", "abducted", "married", "Islam", "home", "Pakistan", "persecution"
Rights & Justice	"right", "EU", "die", "people", "one", "union", "action", "report", "justice", "discrimination"	"EU", "people", "us", "please help", "support", "#loveisnottourism", "#loveisessential", "human rights", "Poland", "Sergei Furgal"
SOTEU	"EU", "Europe", "speech", "future", "thank", "European", "president", "nice", "people", "action"	"EU", "help", "stop", "Muslim", "refugee", "right", "Moria", "terrorist", "Belarus", "better life"

Table 1 High-frequency meaningful and activist words across the topics

4.8. Results of the qualitative content analysis

With the purpose of detecting any recurring patterns in the meaningful and activist comments gathered for this research, the content was qualitatively analyzed.

Therefore, the most representative comments for the overall tone of the recurrent topics were chosen to be qualitatively analyzed. On the basis of their frequency, as discovered while inspecting the word clouds, comments containing the most prominent hashtags and words are examined in this section.

Notable findings depict the consistency of activist comments, meaning that they are repetitive and coordinated, thus succeeding to make their message more visible.

As an example, #LoveIsNotTourism activists directly address their concerns—to accelerate the reunification of the binational unmarried couples during COVID-19—to the European Commission, by constantly making use of the adverb “please”, imperative verbs, plural first-person pronouns, or interrogations. Such situations are witnessed in the following comments extracted from the dataset: “Please recommend a pilot program for unmarried binational couples!”; “Allow international couples to meet this summer! #loveisnottourism”; “#liftthetravelban #loveisnottourism #loveisessential #loveisnottourism European Commission has to do its job and listen to their citizens.”; “How EU Commission dare to let waves of Chinese come to Europe for TOURISM to walk around everywhere after all that happened and not let out the beloved ones? #loveisnottourism #loveisessential #liftthetravelban #loveisnottourism”; “We’re all in this together!”.

The mismatch between the topic of the post and the content of comments is very common for digital activism. Therefore, it should be no surprise that all the above-quoted comments were written on random posts dealing with specific issues such as culture, EU budget, education, and career, irrelevant for the particular activist campaigns.

Besides addressing keywords or significant phrases to the EC in order to capture their attention and get help, driven activists tend to show their support to like-minded users in the comment threads: “couldn’t agree more!!!!!!”, “so true!!!! #loveisnottourism,” “hang in there,” or to encourage them to continue fighting for their purposes: “Please keep pushing! This is important! #liftthetravelban #loveisessential #loveisnottourism.” By doing this, the message is intensified, getting more audience and being a step closer to receiving more attention from the EC. This thus explains the presence of perseverance as one of the core

attributes of the activist engagement: “#loveisnottourism #loveisessential we won’t give up until we can be reunited!”; “You are not fully aware of the actual situation in Belarus. But this time we are not going to stop.”

Social media provides multiple instruments and functions which enable users to widely spread their messages. The hashtag is one of the most used tools by activists not only for allowing users to mobilize and fight for their purposes, but also for facilitating the coalescence of like-minded citizens around the same slogan and making their message viral worldwide. Similar to #LoveIsNotTourism activists, LGBTIQ+, Nagorno-Karabakh, and Belarusian activists strategically use the hashtag as “a lingua franca”¹⁵⁵ for widespread dissemination—“Please help #lgbt people who are living in #poland.”; “EU look what Armenians do against of Azerbaijanis in Europe! Don’t be silent! Impose any sanctions against them! #stoparmenianaggression #justiceforazerbaijan”; “European Commission, people of #Belarus are asking for help and interference!”

However, copy-paste is another persistent function for online activism. A concrete example of such repetition is the following comment “European Parliament, we are praying for help! We are writing to you on behalf of all people of Belarus.” It is not necessary a confusion or a mistake that the commenters address their concerns to the European Parliament on the European Commission’s Instagram page, but a simple proof of the fact that copy-paste activist comments do not particularly show interest in the topic of the post they are commenting to or from which powerful European Institutions they are asking for help.¹⁵⁶

Usually, in the case of activist comments, individuals comment the most, but there are also occurrences in which activists create groups in order to gain more visibility and rapidly make their voice heard: “Looking for binational couples so we can amplify the issue. I have a huge platform and would like this issue to trend on a global level eventually.”; “Has anyone started a petition in France?”

On the contrary, meaningful comments are mostly considerate and coherent, either positive or negative, and resonate with the topic of the post. When analyzing the dataset, it was remarked that these comments can be grouped following the same categories of the posts (see Figure 1 on page 28).

¹⁵⁵ Sarah J. Jackson, Moya Bailey, and Brooke Foucault Welles, eds., *#HashtagActivism: Networks of Race and Gender Justice*, (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 2020), 1.

¹⁵⁶ Barisione and Michailidou, “Do We Need to Rethink EU Politics in the Social Media Era?”, 2.

For example, the European Commission discussed the importance of supporting the music sector which was affected by the pandemic in one of their posts. This post was labeled as “Culture.” Similarly, most of the meaningful comments expressed their experiences and their admiration for this sector. Considering that the congruency between the post’s category and the message transmitted by the comment, which is common in the case of meaningful comments, it can be deduced that they share the same list of labels:

During the coronavirus pandemic music was so important in our lives, keeping us together and hopefully confident. Did you know what in Portugal, since the beginning of March, there was a pianist who offered lives on Instagram, for 3 months, every single day? Free art therapy. So, I agree with this kind of support to the music sector.

In a post dealing with 5G wireless networks, one of the meaningful comments, directly addressing its concerns to the EC, sounds like this: “Sorry, but what about all the environmental and medical issues that have been raised many times about the 5G technology? Have you never heard of it? If you have, what are your answers to these problems?”

A similar instance was spotted in one of the EC’s posts highlighting the significance of hydrogen in reaching climate-neutral targets and presenting the new Hydrogen Strategy. An active and responsive citizen commented his opinions about the topic: “I absolutely love the initiative and it makes me proud to be a European Union citizen! We must now focus our efforts to develop environmentally friendly technologies that produce and distribute Hydrogen!”

Similar to the first example, the next two situations follow the same pattern, namely the idea that the meaningful comments generally match with the posts, making it possible to be classified into the same categories.

Citizens had two primary motivations to make meaningful comments; they were either critical to the Commission’s post or supportive of its content. As an example, both the judgemental—“It is cool that you take the time to tell us something that has been known for 30 years, but why aren’t you doing ANYTHING about it?”—and sympathetic—“Thanks for sharing this! This happens in the Antarctic also. We need more climate action from all: public and private sector, civil society, NGOs. We are all in this together.”—approaches were identified in a post dealing with climate change in Arctic Region.

Last but not least, another important difference between activist and meaningful comments is the moderation and reaction from the European Commission. As expected, the Social Media Team of the EC's Instagram page is more receptive to meaningful comments and positive comments in general, thus providing a personalized reply: "Such a great idea! Music makes the people come together. Have a nice day, the Social Media Team"; "Thank you for your support! Together, we can turn this crisis into an opportunity to build a modern, cleaner and healthier economy." Also, they elaborately answer commenters' concerns:

Hello, thank you for your comment. 5G is the new generation of mobile network technology that is transmitted over non-ionizing radio waves. There is no evidence that 5G is harmful to people's health. Actually, 5G is expected to use smaller cells with lower power levels and therefore incur lower electromagnetic field exposure levels than 4G. 5G technology will transform our economy and society and open massive opportunities for people and businesses in very diverse sectors, such as in healthcare, energy, education, services for the elderly and the disabled, and many more. Just so you know, the roll-out of 5G is under the responsibility of each EU country. We hope this helps. Have a nice day, the Social Media Team.

This is not necessarily the case for activist comments, to which the Social Media Team is less responsive; in case they do, their answers tend to be identical, considering the repetitive activist content. Examples in which activist comments are answered by them are the following: "Hi, we urge both sides to stop the armed confrontation at the state border between Armenia and Azerbaijan. Both sides need to take immediate measures to prevent further escalation."; "Hi, we closely monitor the situation. EU values and fundamental rights must be respected by all EU countries and state authorities." The same response or similar ideas are to be found under the activist comments dealing with Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts or the violation of fundamental LGBTIQ+ rights in Poland, strictly referring to the above-quoted replies.

5. Discussion

In this section, the findings of the research will be critically assessed so as to answer the research questions posed in the introduction chapter and to integrate the study in the larger context of social media use for European politics. Moreover, the chapter sets the scene for further research.

RQ1: To what extent is the European Commission’s Instagram page a locus for citizen activism?

The answer to this question must be linked to the results presented in Figure 7 on page 36 and Figure 8 on page 37. When examining the first diagram, the differences between the three categories of comments do not seem too significant, but they display rather a tight competition. At first glance, the comments seem to be spread uniformly. However, the second graph explains the variation between the comments and the permanent activist engagement unequivocally.

Based on theories of cyberactivism, it is clear that nowadays, activists choose to massively use social media tools for the promotion of their ideas and to vocalize their thoughts due to the reduced price of information, fast and easy propagation of information, high achievability, as well as quick interaction with both political figures and other demonstrators.¹⁵⁷

In a report written by the European Commission at the end of 2020, it was stated that 48% of European citizens use social media platforms daily for the purpose of staying informed, being in touch with other people, engaging themselves in political processes, and enabling their voices to be heard.¹⁵⁸ However, besides the advantages and opportunities of getting politically involved on social media, there are also some challenges encountered both by institutions and citizens using these sites. One of the major challenges is associated with platforms’ “algorithmic content curation” and it refers to the prioritization of the content which receives high engagement.¹⁵⁹ This thus leads to the risk of overexposing activist comments and underexposing informative, meaningful thoughts.¹⁶⁰

Tim Hwang clarifies that the outbreak of reposts, comments, and spam that emerge from a specific piece of information which obstructs the interest of an active user to understand why, when, and where this content was created are the common features of digital activism.¹⁶¹ The repetitive, copy-paste, clickable, and coordinated activist comments written

¹⁵⁷ Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, “Towards cyberactivism 2.0?,” 375.

¹⁵⁸ European Commission, “Social media influences our political behaviour and puts pressure on our democracies, new report finds,” EU Science Hub, (October 27, 2020). Accessed April 7, 2021.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid.

¹⁶¹ Tim Hwang, “Digital Transforms Activism: The Web Ecology Perspective,” in *Digital Activism Decoded: The New Mechanics of Change*, ed. Mary Joyce (New York: International Debate Education Association, 2010), 125.

on the EC's Instagram page, usually take over the engagement of those captivated citizens who want to participate in meaningful discussions on topics initiated by the EC. This conclusion was drawn after investigating the word cloud presented in Figure 11 on page 41 which discloses the high-frequency words within the dataset. The most recurrent words are mostly connected to the slogans under which activists spread their concerns on social media. As an example, the most persistent term is "loveisnottourism," one of the main hashtags used by activists fighting for reuniting with their beloved ones.

Considering that there are more than a billion active users on Instagram¹⁶² and that is mainly populated by youth,¹⁶³ it is not surprising that activists choose to voice their concerns on this platform.

Nonetheless, why do activists prefer to ventilate their beliefs on the European Commission's page? As mentioned in the theoretical chapter and demonstrated in the methodological chapter, the EC is the most active and followed European institution on Instagram. Moreover, the European Commission is known as "one of the world's most powerful international administrations," representing a constant in the Member States' lives and playing a crucial role in influencing decision-makers.¹⁶⁴ The results of the qualitative content analysis were elucidated by the above-mentioned statement. Most of the activists use the public sphere of this page as a tool for achieving close attention to both European and global consequential issues, by directly defending and bringing about political and social changes. It is thus an indication that the European Commission is considered at least as dominant and influential as the national governments. As an example, activists ask for the help of the European Commission, instead of campaigning at a national level: "Please encourage member states to allow partners into their border, reuniting them, with similar definitions and guidelines to that of Denmark!"; "@europeancommission, Please make clear guidelines that countries can follow mirroring Denmark's example."

Web 2.0 tools hasten the appeal of citizens for exposing their opinions on social media. While qualitatively analyzing the content, hashtag activism proved to be the most common form of activism on this specific page. This rather new phenomenon describes the initiation

¹⁶² "Most popular social networks worldwide as of January 2021," Statista, January 2021.

¹⁶³ Yi Ting Huang and Sheng Fang Su, "Motives for Instagram Use and Topics of Interest among Young Adults," *Future Internet* 10, no. 8, (2018): 1; Parmelee and Roman, "Insta-echoes", 2.

¹⁶⁴ Hussein Kassim, John Peterson, Michael W. Bauer, Sara Connolly, Renaud Dehousse, Liesbet Hooghe, and Andrew Thompson, eds., *The European Commission of the Twenty-First Century*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 1.

and rapid increase of online activism stamped with a hashtag.¹⁶⁵ Such a “networked activity”¹⁶⁶ massively contributes to the understanding of the connections between users, the dynamics of the connective action, as well as the way activists use the hashtag in order to center and support both their experiences and beliefs.¹⁶⁷ The most considerable functionality of this tool is, without any doubt, its capacity to amplify ideas that otherwise would not receive mainstream attention.¹⁶⁸ Such instances are really common among Instagram activists, hashtag becoming the facilitator of widely spreading campaigns and easily finding related demonstrations. The most trending hashtags discovered in the dataset cover topics belonging to different agendas: #LoveIsNotTourism, #LoveIsEssential, #LiftTheTravelBan, #BelarusianLivesMatter, #HelpBelarus, #StopArmenianAgression, #StopArmenianOccupation, #SavePoliticalPrisoners, #StopExecutionsInIran, #UnityBasicIncome, et cetera.

Based on the study conducted by Max Hänska and Stefan Bauchowitz, social media tools, such as hashtags, enable the emergence of a pan-European communication space for citizens, generally activists, to express their complaints and widely spread their message.¹⁶⁹

However, even if the activist engagement is preponderant on the EC’s Instagram page, the platform is not an entirely activist venue, but also a space for deliberative discourse in which citizens share meaningful ideas and make inquiries.

Nevertheless, taking into consideration the particular period of time chosen for this research, the limited collected data might not be sufficient for determining to what extent the EC’s Instagram page is a locus for citizen activism. The #LoveIsNotTourism movement represented the key event of the period, flourishing online activism. Would its omission drastically change the results of the current study or would the EC’s Instagram page rather become an avenue for deliberative debate? This is something to delve deeper into in future research.

¹⁶⁵ Jackson, Bailey and Foucault Welles, *#Hashtag activism*, 3.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid, 3-5.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid, 5.

¹⁶⁹ Hänska and Bauchowitz, “Can social media facilitate a European public sphere?,” 7.

RQ2: Which types of activists populate the comment sector of this particular international page?

From the beginning, the context of this dissertation paved the way for a diversified dataset, taking into account the plethora of events and decisions taken both at European and global levels. This variety of topics was indeed discerned during the qualitative and quantitative content analysis.

Is the EC's Instagram page populated by organizations, or is it more appealing to individuals? Based on the theory of Bennett and Segerberg, the shift to digital activism is strongly tied to the growth of individualized publics, namely citizens coping with similar issues and pursuing common solutions.¹⁷⁰ Connective action mainly distinguishes itself by the fact that social media enables personalized engagement which means that the commitment of activists fighting for various purposes and sharing their experiences is self-motivated. Unlike in the case of traditional movements, citizens are not party adherents or members of specific organizations for whom they advocate.¹⁷¹ Therefore, it can be concluded that the type of activism observed here best fits with the crowd-enabled connective action from Bennett and Segerberg's typology discussed in the theory section (see page 18).

This theory is mainly reflected in the results of the qualitative content analysis. After having examined the entire dataset, it was deduced that individuals represent the majority of the activists. Only a small amount of activist commenters were sharing thoughts and beliefs from the Instagram accounts of particular organizations or groups supporting only a certain cause.

Once the typology of the usual activist on the EC's Instagram page was implemented, it was interesting to determine their fields of interests and agendas. It is important to note that there tends to be a discrepancy between the topic of the post published by the European Commission and the issue exposed in the activist comments. This is in conformity with Bennett and Segerberg, who argue that it is common for activists to support specific movements in contexts that are not thematically connected to the activists' cause.¹⁷² As an example, a post about the history of the EU flag published on July 29, 2020, witnessed more activist engagement, rather than meaningful comments. Most of the comments were, thus,

¹⁷⁰ Bennett and Segerberg, *The Logic of Connective Action*, 1.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid*, 24-25.

¹⁷² *Ibid*, 175-176.

related to different activist movements such as the following: “#Khabarovsk #Furgal #SavePoliticalPrisoners,” “#LoveIsNotTourism #LoveIsEssential #LiftTheTravelBan.”

On the contrary, based on the political participation theories, meaningful comments will be engaging with the topic of the post. Political interest, knowledge, and efficacy are believed to be positively associated with internet discussions.¹⁷³ In some cases, deliberation might favorably influence the engagement of the activists. The democratic process can thus solve the conflicts not due to the willingness of the majority, but because of the useful responses that reach the interests of the minorities.¹⁷⁴

After the results of the qualitative content analysis, it was estimated that, in comparison with meaningful comments that get more response both from other citizens and from the European Commission’s Social Media Team, activist comments receive fewer reactions from the Social Media Team and expect less engagement from users with dissimilar opinions. Most of the activists are citizens advocating for specific causes. Their purpose is not necessarily to support different campaigns on social media, but rather to give visibility to a particular movement. This is why, as an example, LGBTIQ+ supporters will not be witnessed standing up for climate change campaigns or Bulgarian protests.

The social media moderation policy of the European Commission explains the limited responses to the activist comments. Some codes of conduct should be respected when sharing opinions on the European Commission’s Instagram page, including the fact that comments should stick to the subject of the post. Moreover, spam is said not to be tolerated, as well as the violation of fundamental principles which leads to expressions of racism, xenophobia, violence, and discrimination based on religion, ethnic origin, gender, or sexual orientation. In case any of the guidelines are not respected, the Social Media Team reserves the right to delete the comments.¹⁷⁵

In addition, the diversification of interests and events covers a lot of topics. Activist citizens deal with specific movements such as #LoveIsNotTourism, #LeaveNoOneBehind,

¹⁷³ Fay Lomax Cook, Michael X. Delli Carpini and Lawrence R. Jacobs, “Who Deliberates? Discursive Participation in America,” in *Deliberation, Participation and Democracy: Can the People Govern?*, ed. Shawn W. Rosenberg, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 39.

¹⁷⁴ Jane Mansbridge, “Democracy, Deliberation, and the Experience of Women,” in *Higher Education and the Practice of Democratic Politics: A Political Educational Reader*, ed. Bernard Murchland, (Dayton: the Kettering Foundation, 1991), 122-123.

¹⁷⁵ “Social media use,” European Commission

#HelpBelarus campaigns, or they follow various agendas handling climate change or LGBTIQ+ matters.

As a result, such content heterogeneity leads to a pan-Europeanization of topics that activists promote. Besides, the public space—in which citizens get to voice their beliefs and fight for their concerns—is another important factor for experiencing the achievability of becoming globally visible. During the past decades, the internet became an indispensable part of daily life. Based on social media theories, social media platforms, like Instagram in the case of this dissertation, are progressively essential for verbalizing and perpetuating personal connections and social networks in the four corners of the world.¹⁷⁶ Activists value the transnational reach of the European Commission’s public sphere on Instagram by simply interacting with like-minded people around the globe, articulating their consternation, and directly addressing their wills to the EU supranational institution, and the EU in general, instead of stimulating their national governments.

To answer this research question, what the theories and results indicate is that, overall, the activists are individuals representing different nationalities and following a wide variety of agendas. They advocate for environmental, LGBTIQ+, xenophobic, gender-related causes or particular movements triggered by proximate events or decisions taken at national, European, or global levels within the same period of time. All these elements represent the underpinnings of topic Europeanization and the emergence of transnational connections on the feed of the international page.

RQ3: Are activist comments displaying signs of a Europeanized public sphere?

One of the important findings of the paper is that most of the comments left on the Instagram page of the European Commission fall in the category of activism—those who promote a cause regardless of the subject covered in the post—compared to meaningful comments—those that engage directly with the topic of the post. Most of the high-frequency words discovered in the collected dataset deal with movements, campaigns, topics which are not to be found in the EU prerogatives or not considered at all on social media. For instance, in contrast with the #LoveIsNotTourism movement which was never mentioned in any of the

¹⁷⁶ Jordan Kraemer, “Friend or *Freund*: Social Media and Transnational Connections in Berlin,” *Human-Computer Interaction* 29, no.1 (2014): 53-54.

EC posts, the situation of Belarus was discussed somewhat. However, among many other events and decisions left behind by the European Commission, the Nagorno-Karabakh conflicts, the Russian and Bulgarian protests, the blaze at the Mória are some other examples that did not come into notice on the EC's Instagram page, despite the incessant activist call for action.

At first sight, this may be seen as going against the Europeanization of public spheres argument, as conceived in terms of a top-down process, managed by the European institutions. However, the activist comments can in fact arguably be considered as signs of a Europeanized public discussion on social media. Activism emerges to forge a new space of networks and a new framework in which a problematization of social and political matters is brought ahead.¹⁷⁷

Since the beginnings of the European integration project, the European Commission has constituted the engine of European integration.¹⁷⁸ As an example, nowadays, LGBTIQ+ is undeniably an essential element of the EU's enlargement and foreign policy.¹⁷⁹ The support and adoption of LGBTIQ+ rights as part of the EU's enlargement and foreign policy is, to a great extent, the result of worldwide constructive advocacy and mobilization campaigns by activists.¹⁸⁰ The EU legitimacy, as well as the intense European ambitions of the Member States and candidate countries, contributed to the possibility of shaping LGBTIQ+ activists' claims within the EU norms of diversity and non-discrimination.¹⁸¹ Thus, the findings of this thesis can be interpreted in the direction of activists being the product of European integration, underlining the humanistic dimension of the thesis.

Similarly, the binational couples supporting the #LoveIsNotTourism movement mobilize on Instagram people with transnational connections. Binational couples are a result of European integration as well. However, the EU did not provide legislation to recognize the informal transnational relationships of domestic partnership, and thus these activists make a call for common European solutions and "sweetheart" exception for unmarried couples.

¹⁷⁷ Marcelo G. Svirsky, "Defining activism," *Deleuze Studies* 4, no. 1 (December 2010): 179.

¹⁷⁸ Liesbet Hooghe, "Supranational activists or intergovernmental agents? Explaining the Orientations of Senior Commission Officials Toward European Integration," *Comparative Political Studies* 32, no. 4 (June 1999): 435-436.

¹⁷⁹ Mattias Kristoffersson, Björn van Roozendaal and Lilit Poghosyan, "European Integration and LGBTI Activism: Partners in Realizing Change?," in *The EU Enlargement and Gay Politics: The Impact of Enlargement on Rights, Activism and Prejudice*, ed. Koen Sloopmaeckers, Heleen Touquet, Peter Vermeersch, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 45.

¹⁸⁰ *Ibid*, 46.

¹⁸¹ *Ibid*, 53.

Supranational activism is ubiquitous on social media and it helps the better understanding of the contribution of the entities to the EU policy-making and European integration.¹⁸² This explains the direct appeal of the activists to the European Commission, one of the EU supranational institutions. It thus seems that the EC is viewed in their eyes as predominantly progressive, seeing beyond the traditional governments of some Member States that define, in the case of binational couples, that marriage is the only alternative. This is therefore the reason activists appeal with the EC, to address the transnational nature of these relationships.

Following the activist engagement of the two pan-European campaigns—#LoveIsNotTourism and LGBTIQ+—it is observed that activists identify and acknowledge the power of the EU and that these movements acquire a transnational character.¹⁸³ This fits well with previous research, such as the one conducted by Hänska and Bauchowitz,¹⁸⁴ who also identified a transnational network of citizens who were mobilized in their critique—in their case, the cause was austerity.

Activists who intensively comment on some topics might be looking forward to some kind of reaction from the EC. Since it was noticed that it is not the topic of the posts pushed by this European institution that generates the most engagement, it can be assumed that EC should cover the topics addressed by the activists. However, there are risks with this behavior which may lead to the deterioration of diplomatic relations with Russia or risk of internal tensions within the EU, for example with Poland.

Another reason which explains the reluctance of the EC to take on board the activist message is risk-avoidance. The European Commission covers a wide variety of topics on its Instagram page, but such information tends to be more appealing to citizens involved in deliberative discourses, illustrated here by the meaningful comment category. Topics favored by activists cover areas that lie outside the policy competence of the Commission. One such occurrence is linked to LGBTIQ+ rights in Poland. The indignation of the citizens can be both assigned to the restrictive decisions taken by the Polish government and the lack of close contribution and support from the EU. However, these activists may not be aware that the EU does not coordinate or complement the action of Member States on such issues.

¹⁸² David Howarth and Mechthild Roos, “Pushing the Boundaries: New Research on Activism of EU Supranational Institutions,” *Journal of Contemporary European Research* 13, no. 2 (2017): 1008.

¹⁸³ Anna van der Vleuten, “Transnational LGBTI Activism and the European Courts: Constructing the Idea of Europe,” in *LGBT Activism and the Making of Europe: A Rainbow Europe?*, ed. Phillip M. Ayoub and David Paternotte, (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 120.

¹⁸⁴ Hänska and Bauchowitz, “Can social media facilitate a European public sphere?,” 7.

All in all, European integration has facilitated the mobilization of like-minded citizens from across the Member States in support of causes of pan-European relevance, such as gender equality. Even in matters of foreign policy, the European Union is perceived as a unitary actor, and activists demand a more interventionist and coordinated approach—calling in effect for a more integrated external relation approach. In this way, they can be considered as agents for Europeanization, and the social media space can be evaluated as a public sphere where citizens mobilize across national borders.

6. Conclusion

This thesis aimed at comprehending the predominant audience and type of active engagement on an EU-managed Instagram page. The findings unveiled the preference of activists to voice their opinions, concerns, and beliefs, as well as remain persistent in various socio-political mobilizations. Even though the specific period of time chosen for this study was relatively short and mainly dominated by a major remarkable event—COVID-19—the activist agenda covered numerous national, European, and global matters such as LGBTIQ+ rights, climate change issues, violation of fundamental rights, witnessed both within the Member States—protests in Bulgaria—and neighboring countries such as Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Lebanon, Russia, et cetera.

Examining these political commenters and understanding their online behaviors is essential for monitoring the public sphere. Over the past decades, social media was identified as the ideal space for political exchange and social debates in which European citizens have the possibility to getting involved in political discourse, by directly addressing demands and interests to the supranational level. Due to the different backgrounds of the active users, the diversity to which they are exposed on the Instagram page, as well as their national interests, a trans-European public sphere was spotted in this study.

However, two major forms of engagement populated the comment sector of the international page. It is without any doubt that the signs of activism were predominant considering that digitalization enabled this communication infrastructure, perfectly-tailor for “networked” mobilizations. Digital activism was even more encouraged by the appurtenance of the EC to a pan-European structure in which they militate for pan-European rights such in the case of LGBTIQ+ rights and the #LoveIsNotTourism campaign.

In comparison with activist comments which were the most frequent in the dataset, but which appeared as being divorced by the posts, as confirmed by both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, meaningful comments were fewer, sticking to the issue proposed by the EC. Solidarity across comments is a common feature in the case of activism, as deduced after understanding the sharing of common interests, goals, and concerns of the activists, as well as the promotion of their massive mobilizations on the digital arena and their mutual support.

Besides mobilizations, social media platforms create forums for political expression and deliberation. In such instances, what drives the citizens to comment is mostly the interest they have in European public affairs together with their yearning for the expression of their opinions on such matters—they dedicate their time to participate in online debates and foster deliberation on the EC's Instagram page. The fact that the EC replied to critical meaningful comments is also part of deliberation.

On the whole, this virtual space facilitated the shift from the “logic of collective action” to “the logic of connective action,” and revolutionized the *modus operandi* of the citizens to organize and mobilize, thus enabling personalized public engagement. In this manner, citizens had the opportunity to get involved in the decision-making processes, to influence public opinion, disseminate information, and nourish networks striving for awareness and social change.

Moreover, the findings proved that the European Commission's Instagram page dwells citizens with transnational connections and provides a locus for pan-European discussions, thus spotlighting the humanistic dimension of the thesis.

The work presented in this paper has a large scope for further research and hence the domain can be expanded. First, the current results could be combined with activist interviews for understanding the real reasons for commenting and advocating for particular issues and also observing whether or not they show concrete signs of Europeanization which could subsequently be linked to previous studies and theories. In order to determine whether the results of the study would drastically change in the absence of the COVID-19 period, expanding the time span of the study would be worthwhile to pursue. Moreover, it would also be interesting to make a comparison between the European Commission and the European Parliament's Instagram pages. Would the EP be overrun by deliberative or activist comments and what would they usually be discussing and advocating for? This is something

worth investigating. Last but not least, in order to better understand the communication strategies of the EC, the reasons for not discussing certain narratives, campaigns, or topics could be inspected.

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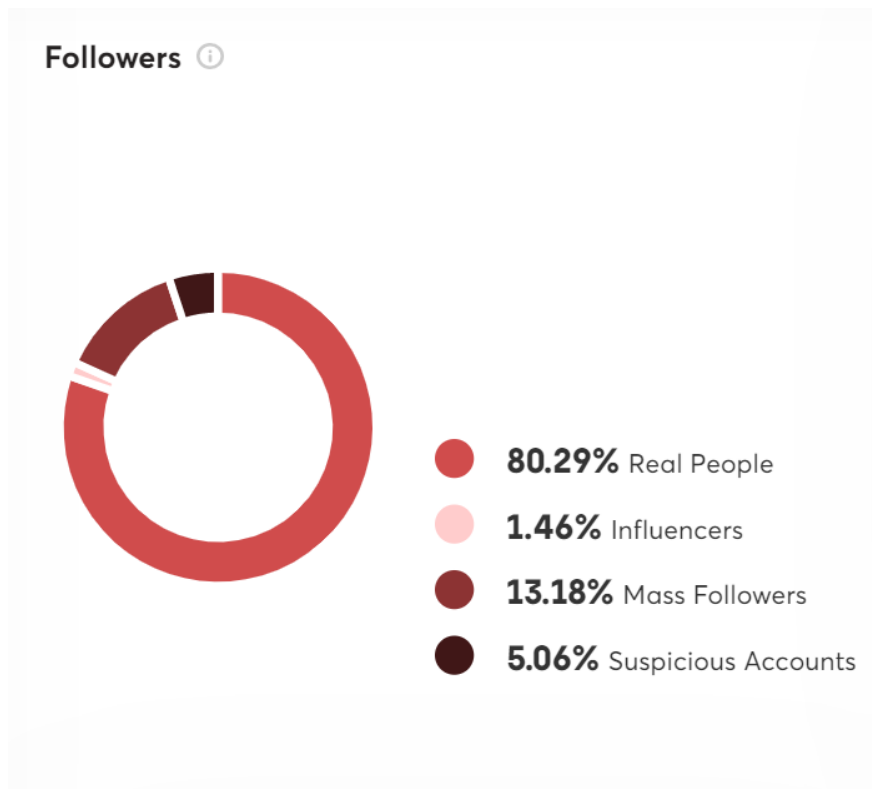
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Appendix

Appendix I

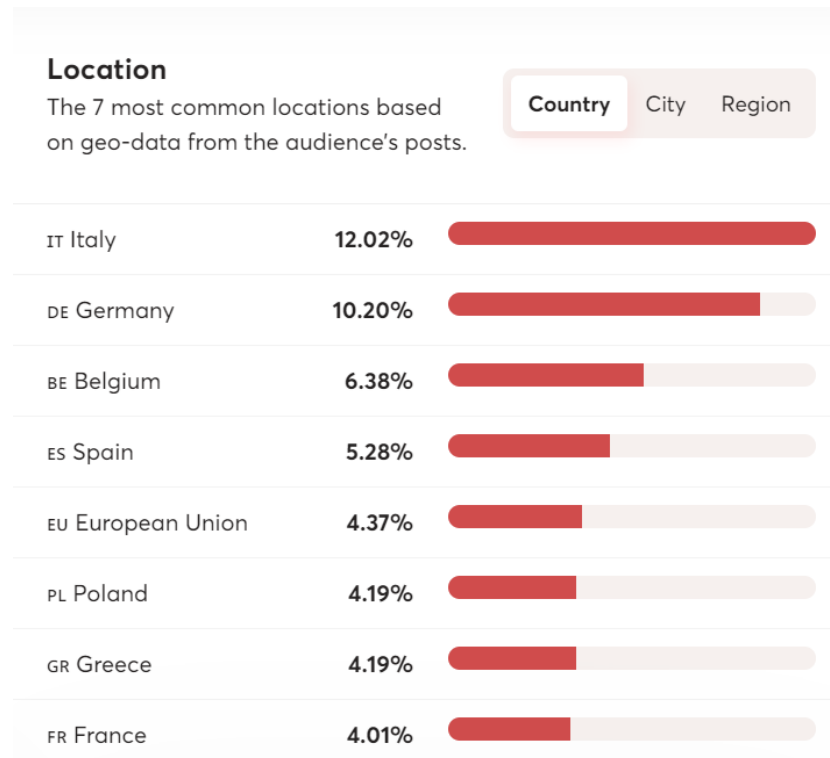
The different types of audiences on the EC's Instagram Page



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Appendix II

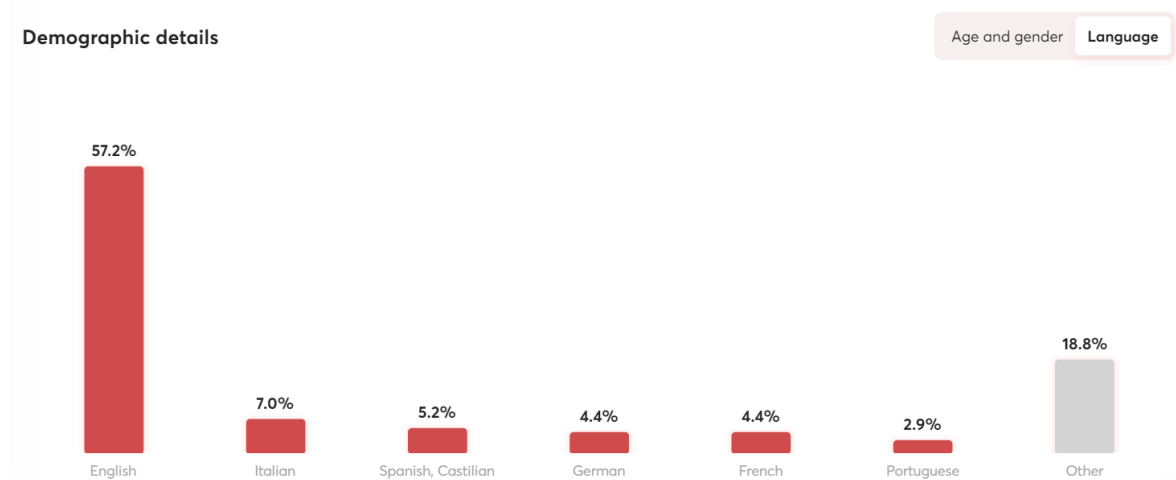
The most common nationalities of users commenting on the EC's Instagram Page



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Appendix III

The most frequent languages used on the EC's Instagram Page



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Appendix VIII

Intercoder Reliability Calculation Results

Congratulations! Your file has passed a basic error-check and is probably OK. But please doublecheck it if the output below seems off.

Note: Because the top row of your file contains letters, it was assumed to be a header row and therefore excluded from the analysis.

ReCal 0.1 Alpha for 2 Coders results for file "Dissertation_Dataset_Intercoder_Reliability.csv"

File size: 32526 bytes
N columns: 6
N variables: 3
N coders per variable: 2

	Percent Agreement	Scott's Pi	Cohen's Kappa	Krippendorff's Alpha (nominal)	N Agreements	N Disagreements	N Cases	N Decisions
Variable 1 (cols 1 & 2)	86.5%	0.647	0.648	0.647	1166	182	1348	2696
Variable 2 (cols 3 & 4)	91.2%	0.811	0.811	0.811	1229	119	1348	2696
Variable 3 (cols 5 & 6)	90.3%	0.792	0.792	0.792	1217	131	1348	2696

Appendix IX

Post 173 in the database

Post Description	Topic of the post - Explained	Topic of the post - Abstract	Post Link	Date of the post	Nr. Likes/Views	Nr. Comments
159. Striving for a zero GreenDeal: Clean Mobility	Green Deal	Green Deal	https://www.instagram.com/p/CF0V1JXKqFO/	September 17, 2020	2512	
160. Leading the way GreenDeal: Clean Air	Green Deal	Green Deal	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFPbsvaqa7B/	September 17, 2020	2956	
161. #SOTEU highligh SOTEU	SOTEU	SOTEU	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFRQLT6BM_X/	September 18, 2020	10.8k	
162. Fighting racism v Equality, Stop Racism	Rights	Rights	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFRl_UqDTNq/	September 18, 2020		2324
163. #DigitalEU We v DigitalEU	Digital EU	Digital EU	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFSHduBqcWK/	September 18, 2020		1343
164. Help us protect EUBeachCleanUp	Green Deal	Green Deal	https://www.instagram.com/p/CF108R3qOhB/	September 19, 2020		3251
165. A virus a thousa Coronavirus	Coronavirus	Coronavirus	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFUXOnHJ5Ld/	September 19, 2020		2591
166. To move out of Coronavirus, Vaccines	Coronavirus	Coronavirus	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFWZvQgqoaH/	September 20, 2020		1373
167. Car-free day in EMobilityWeek, Clean Air, Car Free Day - Brussels	Green Deal	Green Deal	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFW2daWh1UF/	September 20, 2020		2668
168. What is #NextG Economy	Economy	Economy	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFXUDlvnu9/	September 20, 2020		1426
169. EU MT Happy Ind Member States' National Days: Malta	MSs National Days	MSs National Days	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFY3qKIDRUC/	September 21, 2020	10.5k	
170. World #PeaceD Peace	EU Solidarity	EU Solidarity	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFZMMcKnbl/	September 21, 2020		2006
171. Almost 4 month: NextGenEU, Economy	Next Generation EU	Next Generation EU	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFZ0eyeKxX9/	September 21, 2020		1845
172. Today is World #CleanMobility	Green Deal	Green Deal	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFb6z4iumo/	September 22, 2020		3097
173. "I will not rest w LGBTI, Equality, Diversity	Rights	Rights	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFcNG-pkpm5/	September 22, 2020	10.3k	
174. We love our mul Diversity: Sign Languages	Rights	Rights	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFeBM0PH0KN/	September 23, 2020		3858
175. SOTEU - A new SOTEU	SOTEU	SOTEU	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFe9a-UBBCn/	September 23, 2020	40.2k	
176. Our EU Union is Coronavirus, Health	Coronavirus	Coronavirus	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFfgS5_QKlD/	September 24, 2020		1463
177. Congratulations Innovation, iCapitalAwards: Belgium	Culture	Culture	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFhZnQAKRoS/	September 24, 2020		7924
178. Over half of Eur Equality, Diversity	Rights	Rights	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFjWYqJHQ7V/	September 25, 2020		2554
179. Ask the Presiden AskthePresident	Citizenship Engagement	Citizenship Engagement	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFjq6q6h38d/	September 25, 2020	10.4k	
180. Our linguistic div Diversity, Multiculturalism, Languages	Culture	Culture	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFkzAtGqZru/	September 26, 2020		3691
181. We must make t DigitalEU, AI	Digital EU	Digital EU	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFmY3f9Hkjb/	September 26, 2020		2190
182. Let's get kicking! Sport	Culture	Culture	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFoX6nqITt1/	September 27, 2020		1353
183. Let's build the w SOTEU: priorities	SOTEU	SOTEU	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFo9lNNKzt2/	September 27, 2020		2400
184. The EU is the w LIFE programme, Agriculture, Wine Yards	Environment	Environment	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFrZWy_HuW0/	September 28, 2020		2174
185. Today is #World Journalism	Journalism	Journalism	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFrmYhbq6zd/	September 28, 2020		2014
186. Today is #World Health	Health	Health	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFtd-UUoqrY/	September 29, 2020		2282
187. Household gen GreenDeal: Food Waste Awareness	Green Deal	Green Deal	https://www.instagram.com/p/CFt5eblEH8/	September 29, 2020		1738

