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Reactions Towards Politicians' Different Self Portrayals Among Individuals of Generation Z

LOUISE BENDIXEN KETTIS & ELSA SPENNINGE

Lund University
Department of Strategic Communication
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Louise Bendixen Kettis & Elsa Spenninge

Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyze the reactions of individuals within Generation Z in regards to various self presentations of politicians. The study has been conducted based on three focus groups, where certain Instagram posts of Ebba Busch, Ulf Kristersson and Nicola Sturgeon have been presented. As a way of answering our research question, “How do individuals within Generation Z express their reactions towards politicians’ self representations?”, we have chosen to present content of various levels of professional and personal features. Further, we have chosen to conduct the study based on the two theories Media Effects and Framing Theory. Despite the general use of both theories, often conducted in quantitative methods, we have chosen to conduct our study in a qualitative manner as a way of providing the study with in-depth knowledge of how and why certain reactions occur. Further, the theories have been used to analyze various frames, including Professional Frames, Personal Frames in Relation to Politicians Socializing, Personal Frames Demonstrated in Family Context as well as Professional Frames with Personal Attributes. Our findings indicate that the professional frames were more favorably interpreted in contrast to the posts displaying the politicians in personal settings. Furthermore, a professional frame with personal attributes gave rise to the most positive reactions, indicating that a certain degree of personalization was valued among our respondents.

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Keywords: Personalization, Media Effects, Framing Theory, Social Media, Politicians, Generation Z

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background

The rise of social media has paved the way for new media structures in terms of alterations in how modern citizens communicate, gather information and engage with news. In addition to providing the public with new approaches, the technological evolution has shifted the fashion of political communication and provided politicians with means to interact with already established or potential voters (Manning, Penfold-Mounce, Loader, Vromen & Xenos, 2017). In contrast to traditional media, social media enables politicians to have complete control over the published content. Hence, politicians today possess the power to portray themselves in a favorable manner and thus indirectly impact their public image (Lindholm, Carlson & Högvåg, 2021). Moreover, politicians can distribute alternative self representations than the ones being depicted in other media forums. As such, politicians can consciously use their social media channels to respond to external media portrayals, and compete with the saliency of self presentations distributed in traditional media (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Accordingly, social media have been identified as appealing arenas for political communication and campaigning (Abid, Harrigan & Roy, 2020).

In line with politicians' growing use of social media as a medium of communication, politicians' depiction of themselves as private persons have increased as well (Van Aelst, Sheafer & Stanyer, 2011). As such, the social media of politicians often illustrate self presentations displaying the politician as a partner, parent or friend in addition to their political profession. Despite the increased use of personalization within the political sphere, a certain degree of personalization has been disclosed throughout history and can be traced all the way back to antiquity (Echeverría, 2017). In contrast to the historical use of personalization, politicians today have the opportunity to publish content portraying themselves in certain manners to attain a particular image in the mind of the public. In order for politicians to utilize this opportunity, it is of great value to understand how the public relates and perceives personalized content published by politicians. Accordingly, this paper strives to contribute to the field of research by analyzing reactions towards politicians' various self portrayals.

1.2 Swedes' Use of Social Media in Relation to Politics

Prior research focusing on politics in relation to social media has particularly emphasized social media's ability to connect with younger generations as a result of the generation's prominent social media presence (Guðmundsson & Sverrisson, 2019). With this paper

focusing on individuals of Generation Z from Sweden, information regarding Swedes' relationship to politics and social media is of relevance. In a recent report published by Svenskarna och Internet (2022), the internet habits of Swedes in relation to politics are analyzed. In the run-up to the country's election of 2022, it is emphasized that social media will be an increasingly important source for gathering political information. More specifically, Svenskarna och Internet (2022) highlights social media to be the most important source for residents born during the 1990s and 2000s.

1.3 Problematization

Given the popularity of social media and the fact that politicians are in charge of their own content, it can be considered to be of great value to broaden the understanding of social media as a tool for political campaigning. As an empirical phenomenon, political communication and the usage of personalization has been examined multiple times during the last years. However, it has been ascertained that the majority of the existing literature originates from the politicians' perspective and thus focus on how politicians themselves shape their mediated identity (Parmelee, Perkins & Beasley, 2022). While this perspective contributes to the understanding of how various self presentations and frames are employed to attain a certain public image, there is yet a limited scope of literature focusing on how the different self representations are perceived and interpreted by the public. Despite a narrow amount of research covering how recipients' interpretations are constructed, it has been stated that voters' perception of politicians' characteristics plays a vital role in their political stance. Yet, it remains uncertain what factors that exert influence on these perceptions (Lindholm et al., 2021). As social media is the most important source for political information among residents born during the 1990s and 2000s (Svenskarna och Internet, 2022), this study aspires to fill that gap by focusing on how various self portrayals affect individuals within Generation Z.

In order to get an in-depth understanding of our chosen phenomenon, the theoretical framework of Framing and Media Effects will be applied. When analyzing Media Effects, a quantitative approach is predominantly employed (Wettstein & Wirth, 2017). While this method provides statistical facts of how the media exert influence on individuals who are exposed to certain content, we aspire to contribute to the field of strategic communication by providing qualitative information of how and why certain media effects occur. Accordingly, we argue that our study is innovative, signifying that we approach Media Effects in a new fashion by striving to gather qualitative data in contrast to quantitative data that dominates the

particular field of research. The reason for approaching the phenomenon in emphasized manners is due to our aim of providing nuanced explanations to why certain reactions occur, rather than identifying their existence. Furthermore, Framing Theory will be employed in a fashion that is not frequently used throughout prior research. Instead of analyzing framing of a certain issue, we will apply Framing Theory in the sense of politicians' framing their own personality, and thus focus on how these frames are perceived by the public. By combining theoretical premises of Media Effects and Framing Theory, we strive to disclose which factors exercise influence on reactions, and further what attributes that are recognized in different frames. In line with the increased usage of personalization within the political sphere, Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017) stress that politicians use various frames to portray themselves in desired ways. Accordingly, we argue that understanding interpretations of framing in relation to politicians' self representations are of major relevance to contemporary political communication. Further, in regards to the upcoming election in Sweden during the fall of 2022, we argue that using our chosen theories in this innovative manner will contribute to filling the research gap of how individuals within Generation Z reacts to various self portrayals.

1.4 Aim and Research Questions

The purpose with this paper is to gain a deeper understanding of how individuals within Generation Z interprets and reacts to politicians' own self portrayals in their social media channels. An interpretative approach will be devoted in order to analyze what factors exert influence on these reactions. As a way of conducting the study and to accentuate the knowledge within this field of research, the research question of the study will be as following:

- How do individuals within generation Z express their reactions towards politicians' self representations?

2. Previous Research

2.1 From Traditional Media to Social Media

Personalization has accelerated during the last decades and gained more relevance in the way politics is communicated. As a result, media exposure is no longer as focused on the political party, but instead on leaders as private people (Van Aelst et al., 2011). However, despite there being a wave of shifting focus, personalization has existed before the rise of social media, but in other forms than today. In an article written by Echeverría (2017), the author states how the term personal image has been an important part of politics traced back to antiquity. At this time, the personal approach to politics unfolded and played an essential role in terms of leaders displaying personal charisma to attain efficiency (Echeverría, 2017). Research about charismatic leadership further discloses that a leader's charismatic attributes closely relates to the public's perceptions of the leader and the persona, as opposed to certain possessed characteristics (Garzia, 2011). From this point of view, the power of personal self representations in relation to politics is emphasized.

Mass media, and television in particular, is another important part of the increased use of personalization that changed the way politics is communicated. This form of element allowed the public to gain more insight into the leader of the political party. For the first time, the public had the opportunity to witness debates between political leaders, as an alternative to reading about them in retrospect. Viewing politicians in motion resulted in feelings of closeness, which diminished the earlier cognitive distance between politicians and the public (Garzia, 2011). Furthermore, in line with the evolution of social media, the acceleration of person-centered politics has continued. While the television allowed politicians to display personal characteristics in debates and similar TV-shows, social media opened up for politicians to impact and regulate the mediated persona on a daily basis (Aichholzer & Willmann, 2020). Thus, the personalized fashion of politics is not a new phenomenon, but has been present throughout history, yet accelerated in line with technological innovations and alterations in media structures.

2.2 Personalization

According to Lindholm et al. (2021), personalization can be described as an effect of politicians' effort to create and maintain a certain image. At the same time, the media also plays an important role in further increasing the personalization among politicians by portraying them in informal positions. According to Manning et al. (2017), the increased use of personalization among politicians is a result of their effort to create a bond with the public.

As such, social media plays an important role, as today's technology makes it possible for politicians to be in control of what they share with the public. As a result, private and public factors are integrated to a larger extent than before (Lindholm et al., 2021).

Manning et al. (2017) further emphasizes the common recurring lack of faith towards politicians as well as lacking involvement with political parties, especially among the younger generation. These factors explain the motives of politicians aiming to connect with citizens based on other attributes than politics. As a result, politicians' efforts to attract the public are based on their willingness to increase their relatability and availability. More precisely, sharing informal insights of their private and everyday life contribute to their increasing personalization (Manning et al., 2017).

According to Parmelee et al. (2022), there are three different ways in which personalization can be captured in regards to politicians and their social media channels. One form is linked to their political post, showing themselves in professional matters. The other form, individual preferences, highlights personal traits of the politician, various interests for instance. The last form of personalization includes family constellations and emphasizes the politicians' various personal relationships. Moreover, the reason behind the increased usage of personalization among politicians is according to Van Aelst et al. (2011) an effect of two factors in particular. Individualization, one of two forms of personalization, can be described as the wave of focus being shifted from the political party to the politician. On the other hand, privatization points out today's focus on the person behind the politician. More precisely, there is today more interest in who the politician is behind political stands, meaning that interests, family situation and personality are areas worthy of news coverage (Van Aelst et al., 2011). Further, Van Aelst et al. (2011) also distinguishes between centralized and decentralized personalization. Centralized personalization entails a focal point on the leader of a political party. Decentralized personalization on the other hand, aims to describe a more spread focus on several political candidates within a political party, with a decreased focus on the leader of the political party. Van Aelst et al. (2011) further states that Sweden mainly focuses on the political leaders of each political party, as opposed to targeting additional political candidates of a political party. As a result, Sweden can be seen as a country applying a centralized personalization.

One salient factor proclaiming the value of personalization is the view that the private person behind the political leader may have an effect on voting behaviors. In fact, Lindholm et al. (2020) confirm that perceptions of personal characteristics and attributes of the political leader plays a vital role in people's choice of political party. This fact calls attention to the significance of social media in relation to politics and the opportunities that

various social media forums entail. As a result of personal self representations having accelerated within the political sphere, politicians are becoming increasingly relatable and less stiff in the eyes of the public (Lindholm et al., 2020). The relaxed and personal approach to politics has further been observed to give rise to more positive engagement in terms of reactions such as likes and comments on politicians' posts on Instagram than content of political character (Parmelee et al., 2022). Lindholm et al. (2020) agrees with this notion, yet broadens the comprehension by presenting different cases where perceptions and reactions to the personalized content have been examined. One of the cases displays that personalized posts of emotional nature induced a higher level of engagement among followers. Other than that, the representation of politicians as relatable persons was demonstrated to give rise to positive reactions (Lindholm et al., 2020). However, the fact that personalization has contributed to a shifting focus from politics to political leaders has led to a decreased focus on what various political parties actually stand for.

2.3 Personality Traits of Politicians

The shift towards person-centered politics and politicians displaying personal attributes to a greater extent has changed the way the public relates to politicians. The growing focus on politicians as relatable persons allows the public to utilize their cognitive ability to judge politicians based on previous experiences of different personality types (Caprara & Vecchione, 2017). As such, the public can relate to politicians as equivalent persons and associate politicians' personal characteristics to different expected behaviors (Garzia, 2011). However, Garzia (2011) expresses that expectations of politicians as individuals may vary. While some hold heroic expectations towards their political leader, others desire a relatable leader who possesses similar attributes and values as themselves. It has been acknowledged that the former sort of leader often is favored (Garzia, 2011). Aichholzer and Willmann (2020) add on to this understanding by stressing that people aspire similarity with their political leader, yet only in terms of similarity traits which they perceive contributes to a good leadership.

2.4 Generation Z and Politics

One of the highlighted benefits of social media is the different forums' capability to reach the younger generation (Guðmundsson & Sverrisson, 2019). By contrast to earlier generations, today's young adults are raised in an environment highly characterized with daily internet usage and constant media presence (Parmelee et al., 2022). Thus, politicians can utilize

Generation Z's heavy use of social media to engage the target group politically. However, there is an abundance of different social media forums in today's media landscape, signifying the importance of conducting analysis of the various forums as a way to reach a specific target group. When targeting young voters, Parmelee et al. (2022) states that Instagram is particularly advantageous as the app is one of the most popular apps among young adults. In addition, the app is demonstrated to be top of mind when Generation Z seeks for information of political character (Parmelee et al., 2022). In a study conducted by Svenskarna och internet (2022), the level of political participation on the Internet has increased dramatically during the last few years. To be more exact, people nowadays receive much of their information about politics in various forms of websites and apps. This is especially true in regards to the younger generation, which is the group of people who gain most of their information about politics on social media. Facebook is generally the most common platform when it comes to political information, however, not concerning the younger generation. For this target group, Instagram, Twitter and TikTok are frequently used apps to take part in political information for many first time voters.

Despite social media being highlighted as a useful tool when targeting young adults, there is still a lack of adequate research covering perceptions and attitudes towards the content of politicians among young adults. In a study conducted by Winchester, Binney and Hall (2014) the factors behind young adults' choices of voting are examined. Despite more recent studies indicating that social media is the most common and preferable source of political information, the study conducted by Winchester et al. (2014) demonstrates that there are differences in how young adults perceive social media as a tool to gain political insight. While some of the respondents expressed that they would rather use social media for entertaining purposes, others displayed positive attitudes towards social media as a tool for political communication. However, there was a certain skepticism towards the relaxed approach of posts on social media, indicating that personal content with absence of political relevance were not always appreciated (Winchester et al., 2014). By contrast, Parmelee et al. (2022) recently reports a more positive image of Generation Z's perception of personalized content, indicating that content of personal character leads to closer relationships between politicians and followers.

3. Theoretical Framework

This section will introduce the theoretical framework that will be employed in the study. With the aim of understanding the reactions towards politicians' self representations, we will conduct the study based on Framing Theory with reference to Media Effects. Thus, we will apply Framing Theory as a way of understanding how individuals within Generation Z interprets different frames, and further how Media Effects occur in connection to those interpretations.

3.1 Media Effects

A growing amount of research has been devoted to investigating the effects media exert on public opinions in regards to societal matters. Shehata, Andersson, Glogger, Hopmann, Andersen, Kruikemeier and Johansson (2021) emphasize the importance of such research, indicating that public opinion heavily relies on portrayals produced and maintained by the media. Understanding how attitudes and perceptions are affected by media exposure is thus argued to be vital (Shehata et al., 2021). In broad, media effects refers to how the public is affected by the presentations depicted in the media. As a result of multiple influences, there are no narrow definitions of Media Effects (Potter, 2017). Potter (2017) further emphasizes the media's constant presence as a reason for this, explaining that people, and society as a whole, continuously are impacted by the media exposure. As such, it has been identified that media effects occur on a micro- and macro level (Potter, 2017). Yet, this study will focus on how media exposure exert influence on individual persons' perceptions and attitudes and is thus limited to analyzing the micro perspective.

Focusing on the micro level, Wettstein and Wirth (2017, p. 262) acknowledges that the media can exert influence on "...the cognitive, affective, behavioral and even psychological level". However, Potter (2011) notes that throughout the years, various authors have provided different categorizations of the existing media effects. With that being said, there are different views on how media effects should be classified. Despite there being various opinions on the matter of categorization, a theoretical template encompassing all media effects has been developed. The media effect template contains one level of recipients' reactions caused by media exposure, in addition to another level covering four broad categories emphasizing the way media has attained these effects (Potter, 2017). Potter (2017, p. 41) informs that "...cognition, belief, attitude, affect, physiology, and behavior." are the different sorts of effects media may induce. Further, in order for any of these media effects to be displayed, the effects are argued to be influenced by "...acquiring, triggering, altering, and reinforcing"

(Wettstein & Wirth, 2017, p. 263). As such, the media effect template covers all these factors, yet in different combinations.

In order to enable a thorough analysis based on the media effects mentioned in the paragraph above, a description of the separate reactions is required. The initial effect Potter (2017) emphasizes is media effects of cognitive character. This type of media effect gives prominence to the mind's ability to gather information and make sense of it by connecting it to previous knowledge or prior media interferences. As such, this effect touches upon all cognitive processes caused by media exposure, covering how individuals gather information, understands it and furthermore makes sense of it (Potter, 2017). Secondly, Potter (2017) discusses media effects in terms of beliefs. Individuals get exposed to different messages by the media on a daily basis, which in turn has implications on the individual worldview. By taking part in the media, the human mind unconsciously creates a perception of reality. More specifically, Potter (2017) means that by viewing content in the media, individuals are able to extend their understanding of objects, despite never being in touch with them personally. The media thus contributes to an individual's fundamental view of the world.

When focusing on attitudes, Potter (2017) emphasizes individuals' formation of opinions. As such, media exposure can have an effect on how people view and furthermore form opinions about situations, objects and others. Another media effect may be disclosed through an affective reaction, highlighting recipients' feelings when taking part in certain presentations or media functions. Anxiety, frustration, happiness and relief are examples of such feelings. Moreover, physiological reactions refer to physical reactions to media exposure such as an increased heart rate (Potter, 2017). Finally, Potter (2017) highlights effects on individuals' behaviors. This type of media effect can take form in numerous ways, but in a large sense, this form emphasizes media exposure resulting in an individual taking action in something.

The previously mentioned media effects can be attained in combination with several influences. The first influence Wettstein and Wirth (2017) points out is acquiring. Acquiring media effects focuses on aspects of how an individuals' mind distinguishes, remembers and interprets certain messages or features of a message based on the content published in the media (Wettstein & Wirth, 2017). Potter (2017) adds on to this understanding, suggesting that an individual rarely remembers the full portrayal of the exposure demonstrated in the media. As an effect, some factors are more salient than others, which in turn have implications on what aspects get stored in memory (Potter, 2017). Accordingly, the media has the power to influence how certain issues are observed by the public (Wettstein & Wirth, 2017). Potter

(2017) further explains that when Media Effects emerge due to acquisition of information, new thoughts, opinions, processes or behaviors arise as an effect of a certain media exposure.

Furthermore, messages and portrayals conveyed in the media have the capacity to redirect and change "...attitudes, opinions, thought-patterns, or behavior." (Wettstein & Wirth, 2017, p. 263). This is yet another category of effects, defined as altering media effects. As Wettstein and Wirth (2017) calls attention to, these effects occur when the individual interpretation or behavior alters due to media exposure. As such, this category relates to already existing thoughts and behaviors, and further, how these factors may be affected due to different media presentations. With relevance to this study, this form of media effect is of major importance for political matters, focusing on how voters may alter opinions and attitudes in regards to taking part of the media (Wettstein & Wirth, 2017).

Another category of media effects is caused by triggering exposure, a broad term which can be disclosed in several ways. Media presentations may trigger certain thoughts, feelings or behaviors based on earlier apprehensions or routines. More specifically, all individuals carry experiences and views on matters, and when being exposed to content associated with these aspects, a triggering media effect may occur (Potter, 2017). Wettstein & Wirth (2017) acknowledge that triggering exposure has become a significant strategy within the organizational and political sphere, referring to the fact that they often entail engagement among recipients. More specifically, the authors express that recipients often engage in discussions and express opinions when triggered. As an effect, media outlets and other actors may try to evoke these reactions to their own benefit (Wettstein & Wirth, 2017).

The final media effect is influenced by reinforcing. In broad terms, this type of media effect can be associated with media presentations which strengthen already existing patterns of thoughts, beliefs, moods and behavioral processes. An example of this is the media presenting a certain angle of an issue repetitively, resulting in individuals continuously adopting this perception, thus, making it salient and difficult to replace (Potter, 2017). Wittstein and Wirth (2017) further stress that individuals frequently are prone to seek for information that supports and validates previous patterns.

In relation to politics, comprehension of media effects is acknowledged to be of great relevance as the majority of voters rely on the media for political information (Hopmann, Vliegenthart, De Vresse & Albæk, 2010). The media has a great influence on politics as various mass media distribute news and information in regards to political issues, political parties and political candidates on a daily basis (Johann, Kleinen-von Königslöw, Kritzinger & Thomas, 2018). Accordingly, the mass media are in major control over how different political issues are featured, and in turn, interpreted by the public. Hopmann et al. (2010)

highlights visibility and tonality as two important elements affecting how recipients relate to certain featured objects. Visibility refers to the degree of which a certain question or figure is presented. Tonality concerns the employed tone concerning a political party or candidate in the media (Hopmann et al., 2010). While a larger scope of prior research have examined media effects of communication produced by journalists, it is of our best knowledge that the comprehension of media effects in relation to portrayals published by politicians themselves are rather scarce. Thus, we argue that media effects in regards to self produced content is of relevance to gain insight in.

We are aware that this theory in most cases is conducted in quantitative manners. In fact, Potter and Riddley (2007) have conducted an analysis based on literature of Media Effect studies and provided statistics on the methodological and theoretical choices directing the studies within this particular field of research. Covering all reports within 16 journals issued between 1993 and 2005, Potter and Riddley (2007) states that the majority of the studies are conducted quantitatively while 15.4% are approached in qualitative manners. Among the studies conducted in a qualitative manner, eight studies have gathered empirics through focus groups. Accordingly, we do not approach Media Effects in a completely new manner, but contribute to the scarce research employing this form of method.

3.2 Framing Theory

One of the most prominent theories when studying Media Effects is Framing Theory. As such, the interpretation of various frames may lead to different types of media effects (Potter, 2017), as presented in the segment above. During the last decades, traditional mass media have been adjoined with social media as competing sources of information and news. Thus, there are even more media presentations and perspectives presented to the public than before. Makhortykh and Sydorova (2017) accordingly establish that social media should be acknowledged as another important medium to convey frames to the public. With that being said, social media enables private internet users and actors of political interest to add on to the frames presented by journalists or other media outlets in their own channels.

Framing can be linked to shaping information in certain ways to achieve specific perceptions among the individuals receiving the information. By emphasizing various features in the information communicated, the sender of the information can influence in what ways the information will be perceived and interpreted (Kühne & Schemer, 2015). With that being said, a certain issue can be embedded with varying frames in different media posts. As a result, the same content, yet with different frames, may connote different meanings to

individuals. Thus, Chong and Druckman (2007) stress that there is a constant rivalry among different media actors in making their portrayals of certain matters salient in peoples' minds. Attaining such saliency of a certain perspective signifies that the media accordingly are involved in shaping individuals' view of reality and outlook of issues (Chong & Druckman, 2007). As such, framing is often recognized as a strategic means, which can be employed to affect the public opinion in different directions (Holmgreen, 2015).

Lecheler and de Vreese (2019) further describe framing as a process, and hence, it is not found in only one particular element, but part of a means to portray something in a certain way. Framing is first of all embedded in the construction of the frame, described as *Frame Building*. More precisely, Lecheler & de Vreese (2019) underlines that frame building highlights the decision of how to frame information in desirable ways. In order to attain the desired tonality and view of the presented issue, media outlets can utilize various elements such as carefully selected pictures, phrases and words influencing the public's interpretation (Chong & Druckman, 2007). Further, Scheufele (1999) expresses how the combination of elements are related to the person creating the frames, and how both societal and individual factors can be contributing aspects in the construction of frames. In other words, frame building is characterized by elements affecting the formation of the frames. Lecheler & de Vreese (2019) further provides an example on this matter with the term *Strategic Framing*, which is characterized by for instance politicians creating their own frames as a way for the public to perceive the story in their desired way. The second part of the process of framing, *Frame Setting*, is characterized by how different elements and angles of a certain issue affects how individuals interpret and make sense of a media presentation. As such, the setting of the communicated content has implications on the individuals' information processing and learning (Lecheler & de Vreese, 2019). Finally, framing consists of how the story is received, in other words, the effects of framing (Chong & Druckman, 2007). At this stage, Scheufele (1999) describes *Individual Framing* as an important part of how a frame is interpreted and thus how certain matters are perceived. Chong and Druckman (2007) contributes to the understanding of individual framing, explaining that it refers to how an individual frame connects to the individuals' prior understanding of the issue.

Focusing on the effects of framing, an important factor to grasp is the position of moderators, which exert influence on the way frames are interpreted. Lecheler and de Vreese (2019) point out that the interpretation of frames is affected by factors of individual character and factors affected by a certain context. Thus, Lecheler and de Vreese (2019) acknowledge two dimensions of different moderators, where the first category originates from the individual, whereas the other form of moderator derives from the operating environment. As

this paper endeavors to gain insights in how individuals are affected by content shared by politicians, the study will be limited to analyzing moderators of individual kind. This form of moderator encompasses aspects that can be traced to an individual's personality, the individual's understanding of the certain issue or object presented by the media, or the individual's state of mind. In relation to us gathering empirics through our focus groups, the focus group per se can be viewed as an important moderator. This is an unusual way to consume media presentations, and we thus argue for the importance of viewing how this moderator affects the interpretations of various self portrayals.

Linström and Marais (2012) express that frame analysis can be conducted both quantitatively and qualitatively. However, the authors further explain that the process of frame analysis in regards to qualitative studies often involves analysis of media presentations and the attributes embedded in the particular frame. As stated by Wood (2004, p.69), "Qualitative methods are valuable when we wish not to count or measure phenomena but to understand the character of experience, particularly how people perceive and make sense of their communication experience...". As such, we will be analyzing the empirics with the aim of identifying patterns which can be categorized into different frames. We will initiate our framing analysis with two main frames, professional and personal frames. In regards to having an abductive approach to our study, we will further extensively analyze our gathered empirics to develop subcategories of the frames. As such, we will mainly focus on frame setting, referring to how our respondents interpret and react to the various self portrayals, and further, what factors they find salient in the particular framing. Following, we will distinguish the media effects that the interpretations culminate in.

4. Method

This paragraph will introduce our methodological choices which have guided our process of gathering empirics and analysis. Furthermore, an assessment of our methodological approach and ethical considerations will be presented.

4.1 Scientific Approach

We chose to conduct a qualitative study as a result of aiming to provide an in-depth perspective to the phenomenon of our choice. Instead of generating statistics with focus on the frequency of different answer alternatives, a qualitative form of method enables conduction of an analysis with nuanced answers (Silverman, 2017). By using a qualitative method, we were able to observe connections, differences and similarities within our gathered

empirics (Ekström & Johansson, 2019). As such, aiming to contribute to the understanding of how politicians' media portrayals are perceived, the qualitative approach enabled us to disclose how these perceptions and opinions emerge, and moreover, in what ways. In order to provide a thorough analysis by outlining reasons behind the disclosed interpretations and attitudes of the respondents, the character of the study will be descriptive and interpretive. As such, we interpreted the gathered empirics from our focus groups with the aim of finding key incidents and patterns which affected opinion formation, and further provided a descriptive analysis followed by a discussion of our findings.

A social constructivist perspective can further be distinguished within our study, an approach aiming to describe how reality is socially constructed and a result of social interactions between people. This perspective is a commonly used approach within qualitative studies and highlights an interpretive perspective, where reality is interpretable and subjective (Silverman, 2017). With our study focusing on understanding how attitudes and perceptions are constructed, a social constructivist perspective was an undoubtedly chosen approach. By conducting focus groups, we were further able to interpret how the construction of opinions were affected within the interaction among our respondents and in relation to the provided content. The findings of our focus groups were further analyzed abductively in relation to our theoretical framework. Employing an abductive approach implies shifting back and forth between theory and empirics, aiming to find patterns or key incidents in the material, as opposed to directing the study in complete regards to the theoretical framework (Gabbay & Woods, 2005). As such, we initiated the process of analyzing our findings by utilizing a curious outlook, enabling us to detect in what ways attitudes and perceptions were affected by the presented content. Yet, we have predetermined two main frames which we base our study on, professional and personal frames. In regards to these predetermined frames, we used our gathered empirics to coin new subcategories of the main frames. Throughout our analysis, we then discussed our frames in relation to Media Effects and Framing Theory.

4.2 Focus Groups

As mentioned earlier, our qualitative study was based on focus groups, with three focus groups of six people in each group. Collecting empirics through focus groups signifies a monitoring of group discussions concerning a specific topic, thus, observing perceptions. In addition, interactions between respondents are observed as well. The interactive nature of focus groups allows the moderators to take other opinions into consideration and run

conversations based on the questions asked by the moderator. Thus, the construction of attitudes and perceptions in relation to others are further discerned (Alvehus, 2019). In addition, Liamputtong (2011) argues that focus groups give prominence to the arising of new thoughts as the respondents are able to direct the discussion (Liamputtong, 2011).

Accordingly, the interactive nature of focus groups allows new perspectives to be highlighted, something we believe is well suited to our abductive approach of analyzing empirics.

When employing this approach of collecting empirics, it is important to define a suitable number of respondents to gather nuanced and rich material (Alvehus, 2019). Liamputtong (2011) ascertains that a normal range of respondents often differ between six to eight participants. Due to the scope of our study, we determined that six respondents per focus group was a suitable number of participants to provide us with enough data to analyze our chosen phenomenon. The chosen method of collecting empirics was a choice based on what we believed would provide our study with the most in-depth information. In this way, our belief was that the focus groups would create a discussion among the respondents, increasing our understanding of how perceptions towards politicians' content was constructed. Moreover, our focus groups are semi structured, meaning that respondents of all focus groups were asked the same questions and exposed to the same content. However, since the core of our method is based on a discussion between different participants, the group dynamic affected the direction of the topic. Thus, different focus groups covered a variation of perspectives and factors, where supplementary questions based on the course of the discussion were asked. As previously mentioned, Liamputtong (2011) argues that emphasizing different perspectives in such manners enables a more nuanced understanding of the respondents view of reality. As a result, we conducted semi structured focus groups and asked supplementary questions based on the expressed aspects. In consequence, we aspired to provide a holistic view of our chosen phenomenon.

4.3 Design of Focus Groups

To ease the discussion of our focus groups and to create a friendly environment where all respondents were comfortable to express their opinions, we started by introducing the subject of our study and followed up with simple and broad questions concerning social media habits in regards to politics and politicians. By initiating the discussion with broad questions, Alvehus (2019) claims that the respondents become more inclined to keep an open mind about the topic before the moderator directs the discussion with more narrow questions. Moreover, the focus groups were conducted on the basis of *Photo Elicitation*. The term

relates to using images or other visual means as tools to give rise to verbal discussions, which in turn provides the study with material and information. Photo elicitation can be an effective way to gain in-depth knowledge as the method may awaken senses among the participants such as memories and feelings (Glaw, Inder, Kable & Hazelton, 2017).

4.4 Selection of Respondents

Regarding the selection of respondents, we chose to conduct a convenience sampling. More specifically, we chose to limit our study to individuals within Generation Z between the ages of 18-25, 18 being the age of first time voters in Sweden. The reason for choosing a convenience sampling method was due to the time frame of the study, where other methods of collecting data would require more time and effort. Convenience sampling signifies that the chosen respondents are selected based on availability (Alvehus, 2019). Alvehus (2019) further acknowledges that this form of method implies that one must carefully consider whether the chosen group of respondents matches the required representability for the chosen phenomenon of the research. Not reflecting on this aspect may have resulted in a tendency of certain groups of people being overrepresented. This may in turn have had implications on the accuracy of the portrayal of the phenomenon (Alvehus, 2019). As a way of conducting a study which fairly reflected reality, we chose individuals within Generation Z, yet of different ages, genders and occupations. To be more specific, we reached out to friends, colleagues and family friends to ensure that not all respondents were acquainted. Moreover, the focus groups consisted of ten females and eight males, where eleven respondents are students and seven are working. In consequence, we believe that our selection of respondents represent a versatile group of people within our chosen age group. Accordingly, the chosen sampling method will make allowances for the limited time frame and scope of the study, yet enable us to provide research of reactions within this certain group of people.

4.5 Selection of Data

In total, twelve different Instagram posts shared by three different politicians were presented to the recipients. As such, the recipients were exposed to three different posts demonstrating each politician. The posts we selected are a combination of political and personal images and texts, demonstrating the politicians with both personal and professional frames. More specifically, we have decided to present one post of professional character and two posts encompassing different degrees of personal features. This is an effect of our preconceived understanding of professional content conveying rather similar interpretations, by contrast to

personal content which we interpret as more varying. Our aspiration is therefore that the posts including personal features will give prominence to a more holistic apprehension of the different frames.

With professional frames, we refer to the politician in solely professional settings, without any distinct displayed personal characteristics in the images nor the captions. On the other hand, personal frames refers to the display of personal features as opposed to posts solely centralized around politics. Further, the personal portrayals contain different levels of personal elements, a choice based on our attempt to disclose how various levels of personal characteristics lead to different reactions. After showing the respondents these posts, we asked more specific questions concerning the different media portrayals. At this point, we aspired to gain more information about how these posts affected the reactions of the respondents. More specifically, we strived to gain knowledge of how content of personalized versus professional character influenced respondents' reactions towards various self portrayals.

4.6 Selection of Politicians

Furthermore, we wanted to ensure variation in terms of observing politicians of both genders. We decided to present content published by two Swedish politicians, Busch and Kristersson. We chose these politicians due to the variation of their Instagram posts, including both professional and personal portrayals. As such, the various frames provide the study with suitable examples of how politicians utilize their platforms to share different self presentations to their audience. Moreover, selecting two politicians with closely related political stands was a conscious choice. Our aspiration was that disclosing posts published by politicians of rather similar political stands would reduce the risk of political opinions of the respondents affecting the discussion. As such, Busch and Kristersson served as a suitable selection of candidates. In addition to the Swedish politicians, content published by one Scottish politician, Sturgeon, was included. The reason behind this decision was our aspiration to ensure that biased opinions would not direct the results in misleading ways. As we believe that the majority of our respondents already have knowledge about our chosen Swedish politicians, and thus have preconceived opinions about them, we wanted to include posts from a politician who we believed was unknown to the respondents. By including three posts published by an unknown politician, we had the ability to observe if the discussion was affected in any way. As a result, we were able to study the interaction as a way to guarantee that the preconceived opinions towards the Swedish politicians in no way affected the results.

Furthermore, the reason for choosing Sturgeon was a strategic choice based on her content written in English, allowing our respondents to take direct part of her own published content without any translation.

4.7 Method of Analysis

As a way of defining our observations, we classified our main findings, professional and private frames, into subcategories based on the patterns detected in our focus groups. The subcategories we based our analysis on were professional frames, professional frames with personal attributes as well as personal frames in relation to politicians socializing and family contexts. In the process of distinguishing these frames, we identified numerous factors which contributed to different interpretations among our respondents. As emphasized by Dekker and Scholten (2017) various frames are conveyed by different elements such as words, pictures, expressions and key words. Moreover, “These framing devices concisely communicate a frame by resonating with interpretive schemata among audiences.” (Dekker & Scholten, 2017, p. 208). As such, we recognized which factors contributed to certain interpretations and the ways in which these interpretations led to different media effects.

4.8 Discussion of Method

When employing a qualitative method of gathering empirics, there are several important aspects to take into consideration. In order to provide a study which accurately reflects reality, Eksell and Thelander (2014) highlights the importance of ensuring trustworthiness, transferability and credibility. Aiming to ensure trustworthiness in our study, we have followed the directions and recommendations provided by Lund University. We were recommended to conduct three focus groups with six people in each group, which would provide our analysis with a rich set of empirics. In total, 18 respondents provided their view of our chosen phenomenon. The nature of focus groups further allowed us to gain nuanced interpretations of each of the respondents' worldview, covering different perspectives and angles of the phenomenon.

Further, as a way of enhancing transferability, we employed the theoretical framework of Media Effects and Framing Theory throughout our analysis. As such, the final conclusions rely on theoretical premises, enabling the reader to transparently follow the process of how empirics are associated with the theories and how conclusions are formed. Thus, we strive to enhance the transferability of our study by guiding the reader and providing a nuanced description of our interpretations. Finally, credibility emphasizes the researchers' attempt of

being objective when interpreting and describing empirics (Eksell & Thelander, 2014). This is an important aspect as qualitative studies often are criticized for encompassing subjective interferences by researchers (Silverman, 2017). Accordingly, we have actively put effort into being reflexive when interpreting and analyzing our data to accommodate this criticism. Yet, attaining full objectivity is inevitable since the qualitative set of empirics requires interpretation, which signifies a limited range of subjectivity which is difficult to eliminate with the presence of us as researchers.

Further, we believe that it is of importance to take ethical aspects into consideration. According to Vetenskapsrådet (2017), it is of both relevance and importance to secure the integrity of all participants. With the focus groups emphasizing discussions of politics, and thus, conducted based on a sensitive subject, we ensured all respondents of their anonymity.

5. Results and Analysis

In the following segment, we will introduce the detects of our study as a way of answering our research question “How do individuals within generation Z express their reactions towards politicians’ self representations?”. In order to answer the question, our empirics will be analyzed conjointly in relation to theoretical premises of Media Effects and Framing Theory under each distinguished frame.

5.1 Professional Frames

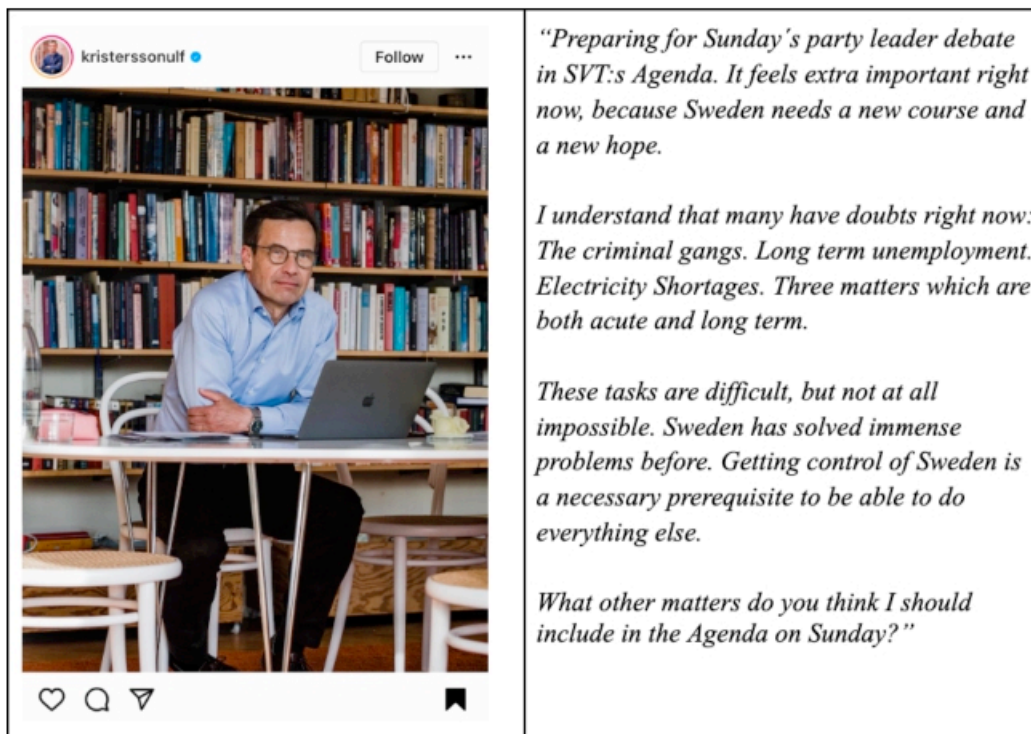


Figure 1: Ulf Kristersson (Instagram, October 8th 2021)

This post, illustrating Kristersson, generated various perceptions and opinions among the respondents and the different focus groups. The first reaction among all respondents highlighted the fact that several attributes in the photo pointed to the politician appearing professional. Many respondents explained this perception by commenting on his appearance. Indeed, the politician sitting in what looks like a library, by a desk with his laptop and staring out into the open air, resulted in his features appearing professional. We align this interpretation to the respondents’ cognitive schemata of professionalism as the previously mentioned factors within the post correlates with their perception of professionalism. This can in turn be aligned with an individual frame, signifying that the individual's cognitive understanding directs their information processing (Scheufele, 1999). We therefore align their

interpretations to a professional frame. The same perception was strengthened by the caption of the post, covering several current topics in society. Several respondents claimed that the caption gave them the impression that Kristersson was reflecting on these matters while gazing out into the open air. Consequently, this portrayed him in the light of a serious politician with the ambition to solve certain societal issues. Some respondents also believed that the text was constructed in a way that would be approachable to all citizens; *“And the way he is writing, there are no complicated words, but instead it is pretty straightforward. It feels like he is talking to everyone, and not just people who are highly educated. Also the fact that he approaches the general public, it is not like he claims that “This is what I will be discussing and this is important for the party”, but he asks the Swedish citizens what they think and they are able to answer directly in the comments.”*. Consequently, all of the respondents identified that the caption of the post was related to a professional frame. This is an effect of the caption containing only political information without entailing any private aspects of Kristersson’s life.

One respondent's perception of the image was that it presented a wealthy lifestyle, and hence, represented only a small part of all citizens. *“The first thing that caught my attention was that he looks like an upper class father in his nice living room talking about long-term unemployment and criminal gangs and it feels like his nice home in Täby is very far from these issues.”*. This expression signifies that the respondent had a preconceived understanding of an upper class father not being in touch with these particular societal issues. The statement was further expressed in an ironic tone, indicating that the respondent felt triggered by this aspect. As such, we argue that a triggering media effect of cognitive character emerged due to this self portrayal. The triggering function of the media effect relates to prior apprehensions making an individual feel triggered when taking part in certain media exposures (Potter, 2017). When arguing for the cognitive effect of this media exposure, Potter (2017) highlights that cognitive media effects refers to the mind’s ability to make sense of information by connecting it to previous knowledge. With the respondent expressing a contradiction with an upper class father discussing these issues, it is interpretable that prior understanding directs this interpretation, making it a cognitive media effect. However, we want to place emphasis on the fact that this interpretation may partly reflect the ideological position of the respondent.

However, not all respondents shared the same view of the post. Some mentioned that Kristersson’s surroundings seemed relatable to many, which made them interpret him as grounded and within reach. *“It looks like he is sitting at home. He is not sitting in a super flashy office, or in the parliament with old paintings with golden frames. It is quite a relaxed environment, an environment which many may recognize themselves in.”*. These

distinguishing opinions can be linked to individual framing, highlighting previous perceptions of the recipients (Scheufele, 1999). Differences in political opinions and socio-economical factors thus may affect the way in which different respondents view Kristersson in this portrayal. Furthermore, many respondents claimed that the post as a whole represented their idea of how a politician should act and appear. They argued on the fact that no personal characteristics were displayed, but that the serious and professional attributes in both image and text resulted in a sense of trustworthiness and reliability towards Kristersson as a politician. As a result, this post resulted in positive reactions among the majority of all respondents.

As illustrated above, there were multiple elements and factors that the respondents recalled and focused attention to when describing the post. Initially, we recognized that several factors embedded in the visual presentation entailed a serious and trustworthy interpretation. The respondents mentioned several attributes of the post indicating such an interpretation, namely, the environment and setting of the photo, the politician's appearance as well as the posture suggesting him to reflect on important matters. The visual presentation further gave rise to some interpretations of him as relatable, while other respondents viewed him as distant when displaying himself in such an environment. Moreover, the structure and selection of words in his caption seemed to convey the same serious interpretation. As illustrated, a variation of elements have been pointed out to contribute to the perception of Kristersson's persona. This correlates with Chong and Druckman's (2007) explanation of elements carrying different frames and forming receivers interpretations. We moreover interpret that the media effects accompanying this post were rather vague in general, indicating that there were no drastic effects emerging due to the media exposure. In regards to the majority of our respondents, we interpret that a modest acquiring media effect in terms of attitudes emerged. The acquiring function of media effects refers to the recipient's focus on certain factors of the particular media presentation and the forming attitudes based on these elements (Potter, 2017). This signifies that the portrayal exerts influence on the way the particular issue or person is perceived (Wettstein & Wirth, 2017). We base our understanding of the acquiring media effect on the fact that all respondents recall similar attributes in the post. To be more exact, we interpret that Kristersson's facial expression, his suit and the environment he is sitting in are acquired factors contributing to their attitude towards the politician. Furthermore, some respondents also acquired information in terms of factors presented in Kristersson's caption, discussing his emphasis on unemployment and criminal gangs. As such, an acquiring media effect of cognitive character also emerged, as the respondent's gathered new information which they stored in mind.

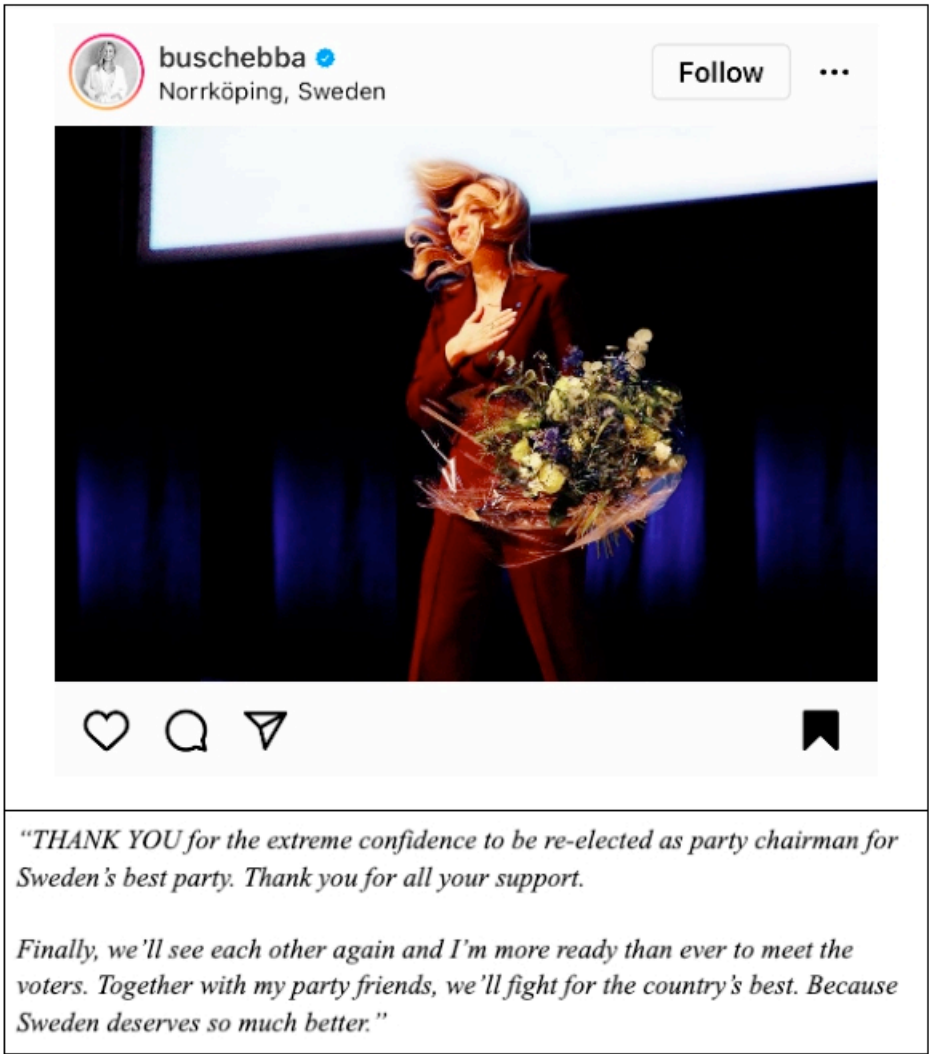


Figure 2: Ebba Busch (Instagram, November 13th 2021)

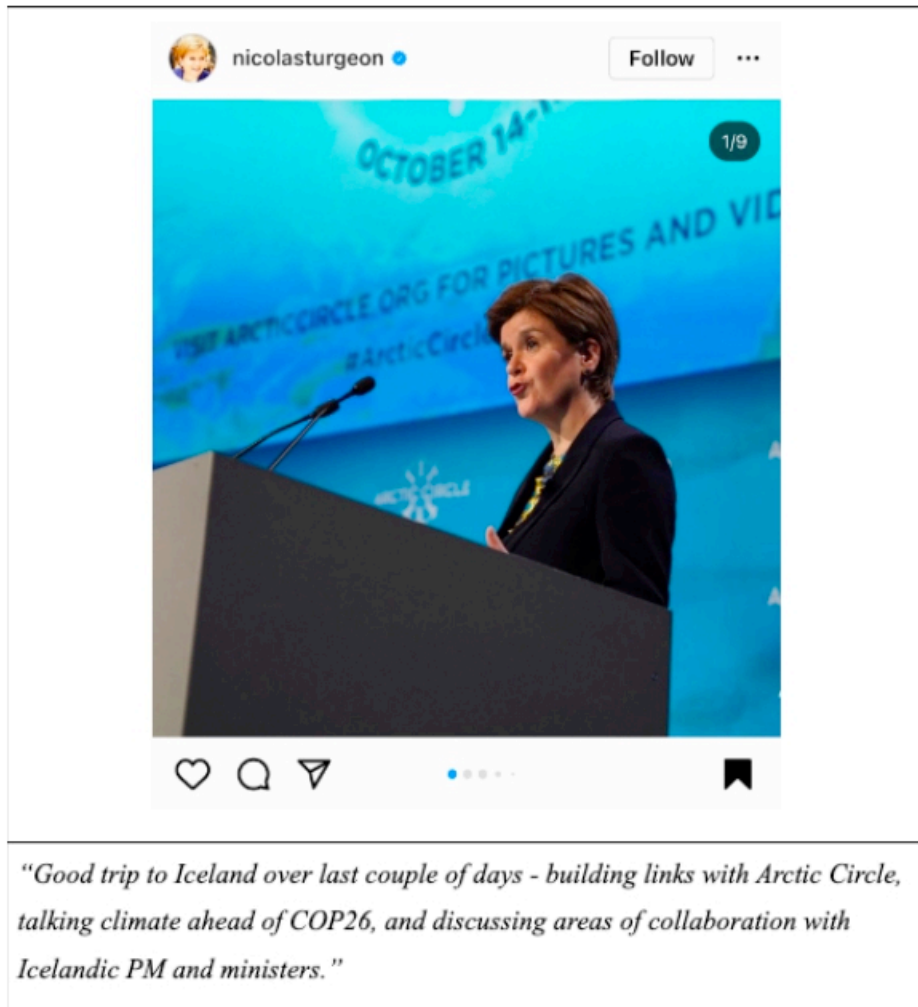


Figure 3: Nicola Sturgeon (Instagram, October 17th 2021)

The professional portrayal of Busch and Sturgeon provoked similar reactions among all respondents. Predominantly, positive reactions were aroused as an effect of the professional self portrayals. When answering questions about how they observed the politicians in these posts, all respondents agreed that the posts were quite nondescript in terms of more personal characteristics. With reference to Framing Theory, the respondents therefore associated these posts with professional frames. With that being said, the respondents only identified professional attributes of the politicians in these posts without being able to observe any personal elements about the politicians as private people. We therefore argue that this interpretation is a result of the particular frame setting which excludes personal characteristics. This interpretation correspondingly had a positive effect on the way the respondents viewed both Busch and Sturgeon as politicians. To be more specific, the solely demonstrated professional attributes had a strong correlation with the respondents view of the politicians as trustworthy. One key word to be used here is the word “serious”, which several respondents used while describing the way they observed both Busch and Sturgeon. They

believed that this characteristic was associated with the politicians abilities to perform their duties in a proper manner. Based on this interpretation, it is evident that the professional frame of solely portraying the politician in a professional manner by no means triggers or induces any strong emotions in general. Instead, this type of frame seems to result in an Acquiring Media Effect of positive attitudes, as the interpretation of the professional setting left the respondents with a view of the politicians as trustworthy.

Furthermore, all respondents agreed that a professional frame is what they expect to see from politicians. Some even argued that posts revealing more personal attributes of politicians' private lives were of uninterest to them. They justified this argument by claiming that only professional settings are of relevance in regards to what politicians should share to their citizens, while more personal glimpses should have nothing to do with their occupation; *“For me, this image felt good, I believe that this is the way I want a politician to communicate.”*, *“I feel like this appeals to me much more because this is her role, this is what she should do. I think that many people want to feel like politicians are leading the country, they are supposed to be a little better than the rest of us.”*. In addition, all groups mentioned that both politicians were women, and further, positive reactions were aroused in regards to this. Expressions such as power woman were especially described in the image illustrating Busch standing on a stage with flowers in her hands while giving a thank you speech. The fact that several respondents disclosed positive reactions towards Busch and Sturgeon being women in this setting signifies that there are gender aspects affecting the interpretation and effect of the frame. More specifically, we link this interpretation to the narrow historical representation of women in the political sphere, contributing to the respondents view of these posts as particularly positive. We thus connect this to individual framing, signifying the individual's prior understanding of the particular issue affecting how a frame is perceived (Scheufele, 1999).

5.2 Personal Frames in Relation to Politicians Socializing



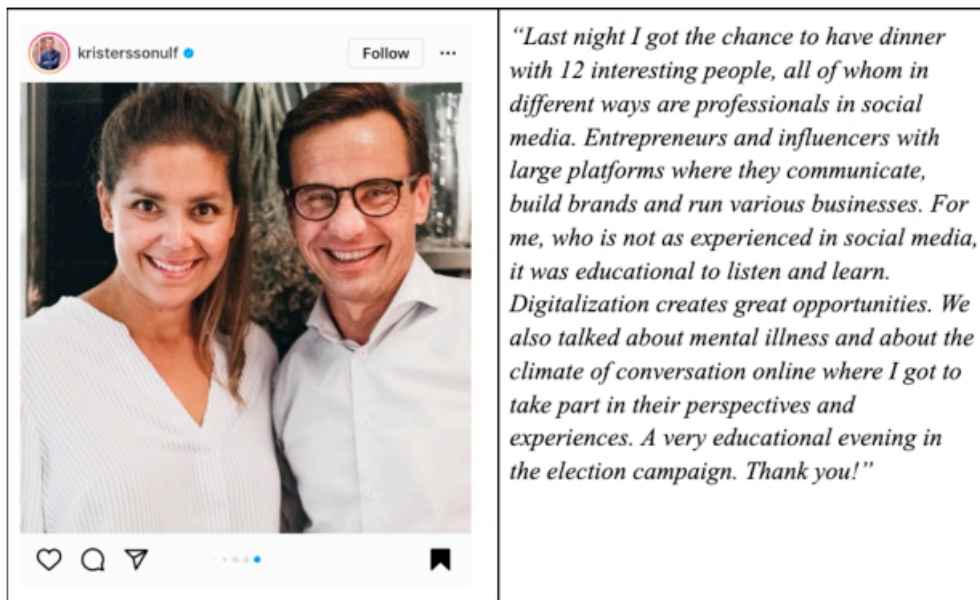
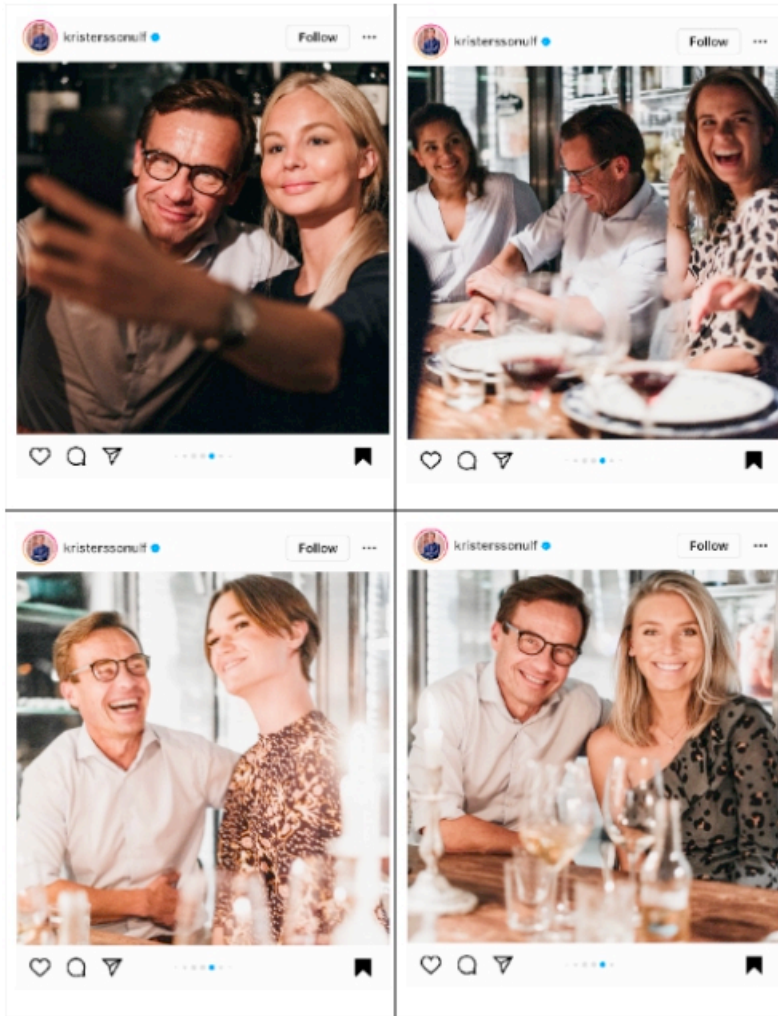


Figure 4: Ulf Kristersson (Instagram, August 29th 2018)

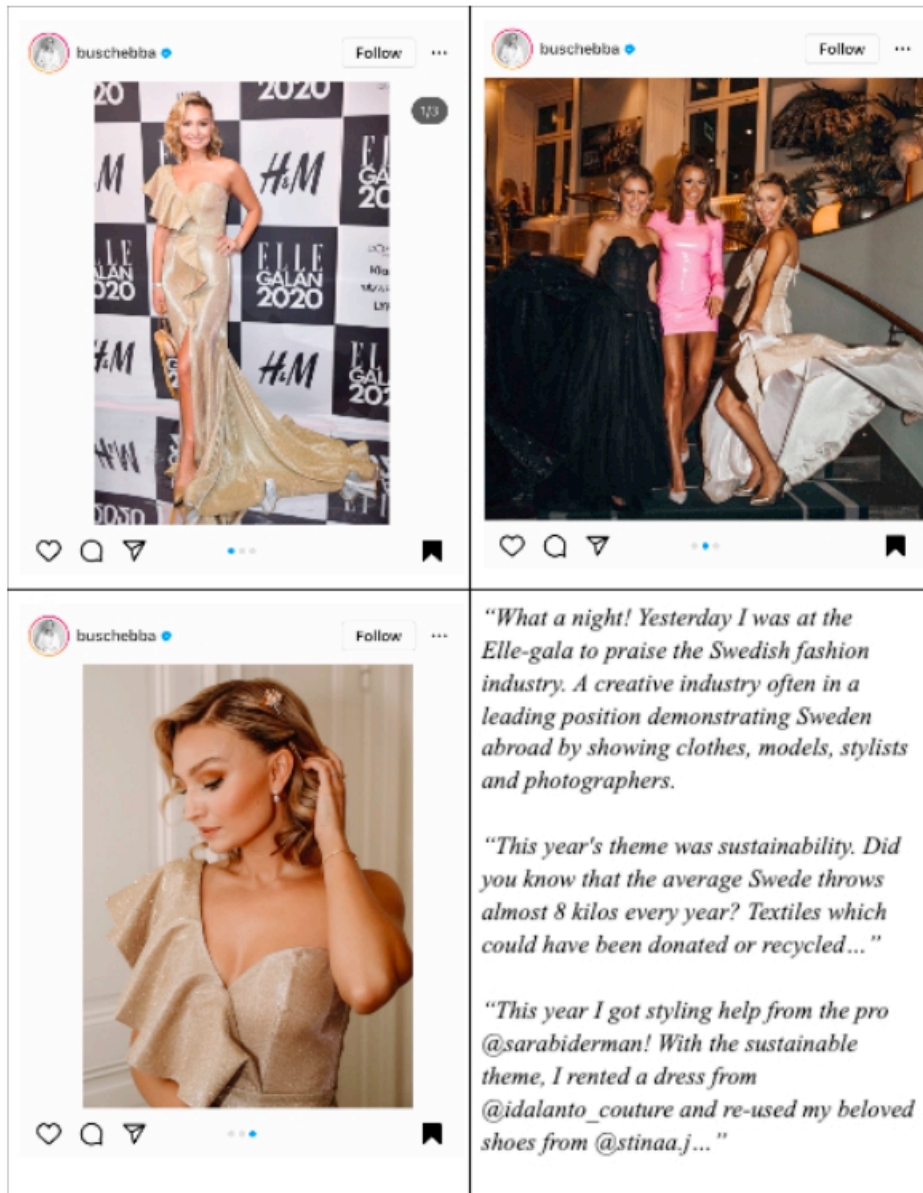


Figure 5: Ebba Busch (Instagram, January 18th 2020)

The two posts presented above, published by Kristersson and Busch, provoked rather similar reactions and were thus interpreted correspondingly by a majority of our respondents. Accordingly, they will be discussed conjointly in this segment. When the post published by Kristersson was presented to the focus groups, the initial reaction was frustration and anger among many of the respondents. *"This is the absolute worst thing I know, it's so unserious! He's a politician, a politician elected to work for the future of Sweden, and here he is, sitting and enjoying drinks with influencers. I actually feel upset about this."*, one respondent irritably expressed as an immediate reaction to Kristersson's post. All respondents shared similar opinions on the matter and interpreted the post as provocative. In similar fashion, the post published by Busch generated ironic laughter, irritation and frustration among many of

the respondents in all focus groups. *“When I see the second picture of her standing in that dress and I feel disturbed, it shivers inside of me when watching it. There she is with that big exaggerated smile and throws with her dress”*, one respondent expressed while referring to the unsuitability of a politician publishing a post of herself in a festive manner while socializing with influencers. As the particular frame setting allowed respondents to form an understanding of Busch as a private person, a result of demonstrated attributes of Busch enjoying parties and socializing at non-political events, we interpret that the respondents classified this form of portrayal as a personal frame. Another respondent agreed with the statement, stressing that *“I do not want to see my elected representatives at a party dancing with influencers. It doesn't feel suitable at all.”*. Many respondents also stated that they experienced feelings of frustration and irritation over the flashiness of the post, in addition to perceiving the post as boastful.

As both posts provoked negative feelings among a large number of respondents, we argue that they gave rise to media effects of affective character. This kind of media effect can be referable to an affective reaction of recipients feeling certain emotions when taking part of media presentations (Potter, 2017). Focusing on the initial reaction entailed by the exposure of both Kristersson and Busch's post, the recipients immediately expressed words, sighing and ironic laughter disclosing their frustration over the content. Moreover, the discussions disclosed that the respondents possessed attitudes and beliefs of how a reasonable politician should act in public. We interpret that their prior beliefs of how a politician should act and communicate aligns with the professional frame displayed in Figure 1, 2 & 3. As an effect, we interpret that the respondents felt triggered by the politicians conflicting their prior belief. Potter (2017) emphasizes that the triggering function of media effects is aligned with the state of feeling triggered by a certain media presentation due to prior apprehension or opinions on that specific matter. As such, we interpret that our recipients' former views of how politicians should act trigger an affective media effect in regards to feelings of frustration and irritation towards the posts published by Kristersson and Busch.

Another fascinating aspect revolves around the group dynamic in regards to how the discussion was affected by these posts. Wettstein and Wirth (2017) acknowledges that media outlets or politicians may use triggering content to evoke feelings and attitudes which further give rise to engagement among recipients. We observed this among our respondents when displaying Figure 4 & 5, as emotions and attitudes of the groups further fueled the discussion with increased engagement and opinions. As such, we confirm Wettstein and Wirth's (2017) acknowledgement, yet stress that the engagement was of mainly negative character in this

particular setting. We therefore argue that the increased emotions entails a rather strong media effect.

Another reason for classifying these portrayals as a personal frame is the respondents ability to describe both politicians as individual persons based on the self portrayals presented. In contrast to the professional frames in Figure 1, 2 & 3, where the characteristics observed by the respondents were attributes such as serious and trustworthy, one respondent described Kristersson as social, friendly and happy based on the self portrayal demonstrated in Figure 4. Despite earlier provoked emotions towards Kristersson socializing with influencers, the same respondent nevertheless described the politician as warm and sympathetic; *“I’m just saying that if I just look at the picture, it’s not like I feel “Oh god what an unsympathetic person”. He looks extremely friendly to me, I mean I would also want to sit there and enjoy a glass of champagne.”*

Furthermore, one respondent mentioned that all eight images displayed Kristersson sitting with women, while only one image illustrated the politician next to a man. *“...He’s sitting and listening to entrepreneurs and influencers with big platforms, showing that he’s a good listener. And also, he’s sitting with women only.”* In regards to Framing Theory, Kühne and Schemer (2015) states that different issues and messages can be portrayed in different manners by highlighting certain features as more salient. By doing so, the recipient may focus attention on these factors and interpret the issue differently as a result. As the respondent focused attention on the gender representation within the post, we argue that this factor was interpreted as a salient element within the particular frame. Based on the saliency of this element, the frame setting resulted in the respondent feeling skeptical. Furthermore, several respondents within all focus groups expressed feelings of skepticism, emphasizing a conviction of Kristersson's eventual agenda behind the post. We base this interpretation on expressions such as *“It feels more like a photoshoot than something they have captured spontaneously.”* and *“... it feels like he wants to portray the gathering in the sense of it having another purpose than it actually has.”* Accordingly, the frame is apprehended as a PR-trick aiming to attract young voters, which gave rise to a framing effect of cynicism.

Respondents further described Busch as lively, social, elegant and good-looking. Based on the respondents' conversations, Busch's looks and festive setting with influencers seemed to carry the interpretation of the frame. The ascribed personal attributes are encountered with skepticism and irritation in similar ways as with Kristersson's post. We thus interpret that these feelings are the framing effects of Busch's conveyed self portrayal. In relation to the post published by Busch, several respondents expressed a decrease of trust towards the politician after being exposed to her self portrayal. *“...Less trust, less respect*

should maybe not be said. But it makes me respect her less as a politician at least.”, one respondent expressed. In another focus group, one respondent expressed *“It automatically feels unserious and I therefore lose confidence in her”*. Many respondents emphasized their decrease of trust in Busch when exposed to Figure 5 directly after having viewed Figure 2, which portrays the politician in a professional setting. We thus identify an altering media effect in terms of changes in attitudes, where the personal frame of Busch in relation to influencers alters the level of perceived trustworthiness towards the politician. Wettstein and Wirth (2017) highlights that altering media effects are identified when factors such as opinions or attitudes change after having engaged with content in media. We thus argue that this type of personal and festive frame entails risks concerning reactions of inappropriateness and disturbingness. As Wettstein and Wirth (2017) ascertain triggering media effects to be especially important for political matters in terms of voters altering attitudes due to media exposure, we have come to the conclusion that the similar frames of Kristersson and Busch entails negative perceptions and may alter follower’s attitudes and opinions regarding them as politicians.

Several respondents further mentioned that they interpreted the posts (Figure 4 & 5) as metropolitan centered, referring to their perception of the posts as non inclusive and directed to the upper class. This notion was expressed by statements such as: *“...It feels like it's a bit metropolitan centered in my opinion.”* In the same focus group, two other respondents agreed and expressed concern over the fact that the particular frame of both Kristersson and Busch represented only a small percentage of the citizens, *“...I don't know, is this really a politician of the people?”* The fact that only some respondents reflected on this matter signifies that individual factors play an important role in this interpretation. We connect this to the notion stated by Scheufele (1999), expressing that the interpretation of a frame is dependent on the individual framing. As such, we believe that the political stand of these respondents may have impacted their interpretation of the frame, and that the factors in the posts demonstrating a glamorous lifestyle fails to align with their image of a preferable politician.

Lastly, we observed an interesting discussion about gender stereotypes in relation to this particular type of framing. When being exposed to Figure 4, demonstrating Kristersson in a festive manner, the respondents had no explicit comments on his appearance. On the contrary, several respondents commented on the looks of Busch in the post demonstrating her in a festive setting. *“The first thing I notice is a gorgeous dress, a very charming person. But is this a politician? This decreases my trust in her, because I don't think a politician should be focusing on being good-looking...”*. However, one respondent showed some hesitation to these judgments. *“It feels so easy to judge a woman for putting effort into being good-looking. At the same time, Ulf Kristersson may also have put a lot of effort into looking handsome for*

his post, yet it is not appearing as evidently. In one way, it feels problematic to express it, even if I agree on what you are saying...". Similar opinions were expressed in another focus group, where a respondent uttered an equivalent comment; *"...Maybe I am over analyzing it, but there is something about her being a woman... If there was a man standing in a suit it would automatically feel more serious. It's something with the dress, the gold and the curls. The female attributes make it feel more festive, perhaps."*. Consequently, we identified the value of the focus group as an important moderator for how frames are interpreted. This can be aligned with the notion emphasized by Lecheler and de Vreese (2019), highlighting the fact that different moderators exert influence on the interpretation of frames. As the remaining respondents were enlightened about possible preconceived gender stereotypes in relation to the particular frame, they expressed that the portrayal of a woman in contrast to a man was irrelevant to how the frame was interpreted. However, many of these respondents had commented on Busch's appearance without mentioning the same attributes in the image of Kristersson, and thus signifying that the female attribute may have subconsciously affected their judgment. In regards to Media Effects, the distinction of judgment in regards to the appearance of men versus women suggests there being a tendency of respondents experiencing a stronger triggering media effect in relation to female attributes being displayed in this specific context. Further, other respondents reflected on the gender aspects and came to terms with the fact that the gender aspect may have contributed to the interpretation of Busch.

5.3 Personal Frames Demonstrated in Family Contexts



"The whole family visited our student in Linköping this weekend. Gray and rainy, but very nice. Fun to get acquainted with a new city - and to visit a student pub... I got a guided tour in the C-house. I observed the big white board and realized that no, I won't be teaching her everything I know 😊"

Figure 6: Ulf Kristersson (Instagram, November 6th 2021)



*"Motherhood. The mothership. The most important task I have.
This is my flock. I will guard it until my last day.
#mothersday #thankful"*

Figure 7: Ebba Busch (Instagram, May 31th 2020)

These two posts, representing Busch and Kristersson in more personal and relaxed settings, gave rise to more favorable opinions compared to the personal frame of them socializing with influencers. This perception predominantly had reference to the respondents impression of feeling within reach of the two politicians. Furthermore, many respondents claimed that observing these party leaders in private settings generated a sense of relatability towards them. In regards to Framing Theory, we have come to the conclusion that the perceptions of all respondents conclude that these posts are aligned with personal frames. There are many personal attributes strengthening the perception of personal frames, including the relaxed and private environments of the photos, the captions not covering political issues, and the fact that both politicians display their families in the posts. Hence, no political features are included in the images nor the captions. Further, many respondents claimed that their understanding towards the politicians increased. More precisely, the same respondents stated that Busch's motherhood as well as Kristersson's fatherhood contributed to their perception of the politicians as multifaceted and friendly. In addition, it contributed to a sense of their ability to juggle many tasks at once.

The interpretation of personal frames leading to a perception regarding both politicians' ability to maintain various roles at once was especially directed at Busch's post. Here, all respondents agreed that the post gave them a more positive view of the party leader in contrast to the frame demonstrated in Figure 5. One respondent even claimed that the post shed light on Busch in regards to attributes including empathy, warmth and stress resistance. Another respondent continued this argument by explaining the perception of Busch's motherhood subconsciously having a correlation with her political identity in that these attributes may have an effect on her political opinions. *"This may sound weird but I am testing a theory. I have trust towards people who are mothers. I praise them for that. So something here makes it feel good. That a mother is a politician."* We connect this expression to individual framing (Chong & Druckman, 2007), indicating that the particular respondent has a cognitive stored image of motherly attributes affecting how the frame is perceived. In regards to the discussion within the particular focus group, other respondents emphasized Busch as a power woman and agreed that her motherhood contributed to a sense of her capacity to maneuver numerous responsibilities and undertakings. Accordingly, this personal frame setting leads to a framing effect where the respondents gain confidence in Busch as a politician.

However, not all respondents shared the same positive view of Busch's post. Some respondents believed that the post came across as planned and unspontaneous. They argued

that Busch had clear motives in sharing the post, other than wanting to share personal glimpses of her life. Indeed, many respondents believed that the motive of the post was to show her followers how good of a mother she was. The caption of the post also contributed to this perception. The respondents argued that the caption was perceived as strained and nonspontaneous. *“It seems a bit excessive, “This is my flock, I will watch over it until my last day”. Doesn't it feel a little forced and excessive and like she really really wants to underline her motherhood?”* In fact, even the respondents with positive views of the images claimed that the caption generated a less positive attitude towards the post. As such, we interpret that the particular frame setting, demonstrating Busch as a mother, mostly was positively interpreted. However, many respondents believed that the frame was communicated in an exaggerated way, giving rise to a negative framing effect as her posts were interpreted as non authentic. Accordingly, we interpret that the respondents have prior understanding of how politicians should portray themselves to be perceived as authentic. On the other hand, many of the respondents identified the post shared by Kristersson as more spontaneous. They argued that one relevant factor forming this perception was the fact that the faces of his children were visible. They compared this to the image demonstrating Busch accompanied by her children with blurred faces, which they interpreted as her effort to be the center of the image and portraying herself as an accomplished mother. In relation to this interpretation, we argue that a vague, yet still existing triggering media effect occurred. We base this understanding on the perception of some respondents, entailing that the motive of the post was for Busch to market herself in a certain way as opposed to displaying her family in a natural way. Potter (2017) argues that the triggering media effect is a reaction of something already existing within the individual. The triggering effect resulted in a skeptic attitude towards Busch. In relation to the post published by Kristersson, respondents believed that the images as well as the caption seemed more spontaneous and relaxed. Several respondents also mentioned the tone of the caption, making it seem like Kristersson himself had written the text. Furthermore, multiple respondents highlighted the fact that the post portrayed Kristersson as a family man. As a result, they believed that the post made him more human and perceived him as within reach.

Nonetheless, the opinions about Kristersson’s post were divided as several respondents believed that this post was irrelevant for a politician to share. *“He comes across as a fun dad and he shows his family. But at the same time I feel like: Do I want politicians to be influencers? Do I need a glimpse in their private lives to know who I should vote for?”* As a result, we were able to conclude that some respondents were skeptical of politicians using personal frames, as they believed that politicians should share content in relation to their profession. Some even believed that this type of content was inappropriate and that it affected

how they perceived the politician in their professional role. One respondent argued that this type of content may imply that the politician spends more time creating an image than on their political duties. *“I think it is bothering with personalization of politics and that there is such a focus on what politicians do in their private lives. Why should I know that? Of course they are real people, I don't need to see a picture of their children to know that. Stefan Löfven is an example of a politician where it says “This is handled by the Prime Minister's Office” in his Instagram bio and where the photos are of him in different political settings. And in some ways it feels sympathetic because it feels like he spends time on other things, more important things.”*

To conclude, we interpret that the majority of the respondents were positive towards the parental attributes associated with the particular frame setting. However, the discussions of all focus groups were aligned with a certain degree of skepticism, questioning the authenticity of the posts. While a few respondents experienced a triggering media effect by Busch's posts being centralized around herself, we argue that the majority only acquired information of Busch and Kristersson as parents by observing their families. Thus, an acquiring media effect of cognitive character, meaning that the respondents gathered information about the politicians family lives, emerged as a result of the particular frame.

5.4 Professional Frames with Personal Attributes



Figure 8: Nicola Sturgeon (Instagram, August 4th 2021)

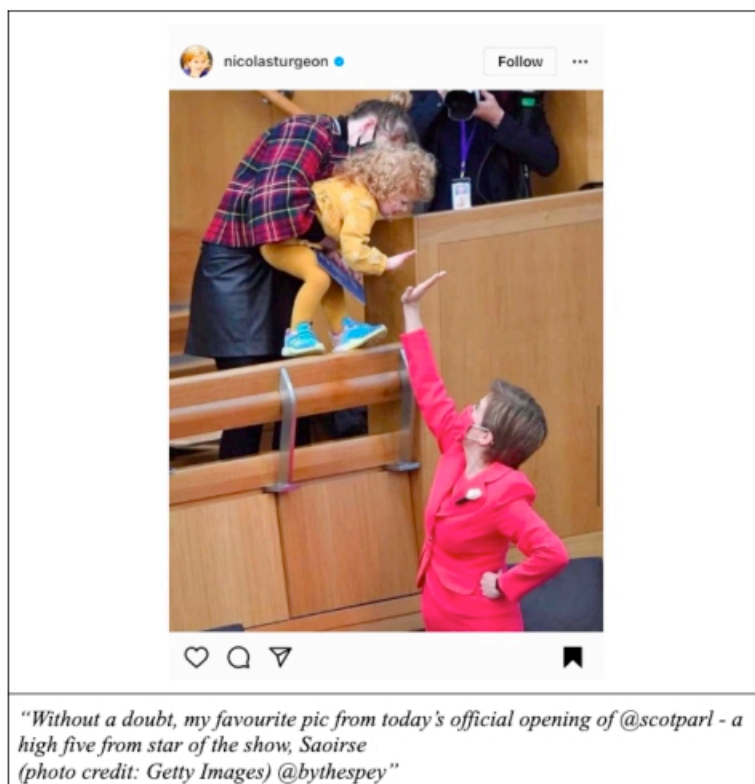


Figure 9: Nicola Sturgeon (Instagram, October 2nd 2021)

These two posts (Figure 8 & 9) demonstrating Sturgeon in different settings gave rise to significantly more positive reactions among all respondents, compared to all previous posts. As opposed to the other posts aligned with a professional frame, which many respondents believed were rather bland and nondescript in regards to how the politicians were portrayed, these posts gave rise to engagement and involvement. There were many attributes contributing to the fact that the respondents identified the posts along with professional frames, and the most substantial factor was that the posts illustrated Sturgeon in her profession. Although the posts demonstrated the politician in professional matters, the respondents believed that Sturgeon was able to show glimpses of her personality in a natural and relaxed way. Thus, we categorized these posts as conveying a professional frame with personal attributes. In relation to the solely professional frames and the frames of personal character, several respondents repeatedly expressed that this particular form of portrayal contributed to significantly positive perceptions of the politician. As such, the respondents favored this angle of politicians' self portrayals, aligning the respondents' interpretation of the certain frame setting. Lecheler and De Vreese (2019) acknowledge that the setting of an issue, referring to the particular angle an issue is presented in, entails various interpretations. The diverse interpretations of Sturgeon's display of a solely professional setting versus demonstrations of her personal characteristics in professional settings illustrates how the frame setting affects the recipients' perception of her.

Kühne and Schemer (2015) explains that frames can be interpreted differently as an effect of some characteristics being underscored more than others. There were numerous aspects and attributes of both posts which contributed to such a favorable response among the respondents. A number of people argued for their appreciation towards the fact that the posts demonstrated Sturgeon being out in society and socializing with locals. *"It feels positive, it feels like a good politician. I feel like these are the kinds of things I want a politician to do, instead of going to galas and socializing with influencers. Here, she is out gaining some kind of understanding for local communities and following up the things she wants to get through politically."* This perception was especially directed at the post illustrated in Figure 8. Many respondents carried on this discussion by explaining that they perceived this action as Sturgeon being interested in gaining insights into different communities, as opposed to taking stands without having any actual experience from various parts of society. *"Even in your profession you are supposed to meet the people of the country, and for example meet homeless children and people who can't afford to buy shoes, etc. This is so important so they know what to do about the problem."* A similar perception was interpreted towards the post illustrated in Figure 9. Many respondents appreciated the fact that Sturgeon was demonstrated on political

duties and that the image captured her in the moment. They further acknowledged that this consequently portrayed the post as spontaneous and non-strategic. A number of respondents further claimed that this created a feeling of trust towards Sturgeon, meaning that she took her profession seriously instead of attending events as a way to socialize with influencers, for instance. Many respondents also expressed that the post created an interpretation of her as warm and inclusive.

A number of respondents mentioned that the way Sturgeon was captured in the image found in Figure 8 generated a perception of her being one of the people, as opposed to being above others. This interpretation differs from the solely professional frames that generally evoked feelings of the politicians being superior. They explained that this perception was an effect of her posture and the child playing with her shoes. *“And she is barefoot. And she also writes that; “I almost had to leave without my shoes”. No but this, I LIKE. She seems to be a serious politician, but she's not afraid to loosen up and stand barefoot.”*. The post generated laughter and smiles among several respondents as they took part in the media portrayal. As such, we interpret that the post entailed an acquiring media effect of affective character. While Potter (2017) explains that the affective character refers to different emotions evolving due to media exposure, we argue that this post gave rise to joy based on disclosed laughter and several respondents expressing the post as entertaining. The acquired elements making the respondents feel joy thus seems to be her humorous caption and her posture. The same post also generated feelings of warmth and sympathy towards the politician. Many respondents highlighted the fact that the image displayed Sturgeon in her professional role while at the same time appearing joyful. These respondents mentioned that they believed that the post was professional and relevant to her profession as a politician, but that the demonstrated attributes of Sturgeon’s personality made the post interesting and entertaining.

A number of respondents also mentioned that the content illustrated in Sturgeon’s posts was the type of content they expected to see from politicians on Instagram. Those respondents who previously stated that they were skeptical towards politicians sharing personalized content even argued that this type of content made it more desirable for them to follow politicians on Instagram. *“I read the news to get updates, and that's why I'm not interested in politicians as a private people. But if there's any situation that would be interesting it is this. Because this is like a news update. You get to see her working and meeting people in her profession. That's how I imagine a politician's Instagram to look like.”* With reference to Framing Theory, we connect this emotional state to frame setting, emphasizing a specific angle which directs the interpretation of the frame (Lecheler & Vreese, 2019). We therefore argue that many of our respondents had positive attitudes towards

this content as it was aligned with their preference of how politicians should communicate on Instagram. *“I have been quite cynical about the other posts, but this I really like.”* In regards to the effects of framing it is thus possible to disclose that employing a professional frame, yet while adding a personal touch to that frame, seems to give rise to the most beneficial reactions among recipients. We further grasped that while the other types of frames provoked varying opinions, the professional frame with personal attributes solely entailed positive attitudes and emotions among the respondents. As such, we argue that personalization within political communication is appreciated when aligning it with the political profession. However, we conclude that employing solely personal frames entails risks as several of our respondents were cynical towards this frame setting.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

To answer our research question “How do individuals within Generation Z express their reactions towards politicians’ self representations?”, we were able to observe that the different posts entailed a variation of reactions among the respondents. The first displayed frame, demonstrating the politicians as solely professionals, gave rise to overall positive attitudes. This attitude can be directed to the notion described by Winchester et al. (2014), emphasizing that many young adults favor social media as a platform for political information. Further, many respondents claimed that observing the politicians in solely professional settings generated a rather bland interpretation of the politician. Hence, this framing did not generate any strong engagement. However, many respondents added that the professional frame of the politician gave rise to increased trustworthiness and aligned with their previous assumptions of how politicians communicate in their social media. Despite the positive attitudes, we observed that this form of framing did not lead to strong engagement.

On the other hand, the posts demonstrating the politicians in more personal settings fueled the discussions and gave rise to strong opinions. The posts of Kristersson and Busch in festive manners generated skepticism among a majority of all respondents. More precisely, a number of respondents emphasized that this type of content seemed unsuitable and contradicted previous beliefs of what politicians should display to their audience. Hence, this aligns with Aichholzer and Willmann (2020) research, stressing that people aspire to be relatable with their political leader, yet only in terms of similarity traits which they perceive contributes to a good leadership. As such, we have come to the conclusion that this form of behavior does not correlate with our respondents' association of good leadership. We further observed that the frame was interpreted differently based on the gender of the politician. More

specifically, the appearance of the politician, which we interpret as an important framing device to this specific frame, gave rise to different attitudes. We observed that certain female attributes gave rise to more judgemental opinions which affected the interpretation of the frame among some respondents. However, this judgment was also questioned by other respondents, claiming that this specific judgment was associated with gender stereotypes and norms.

Yet another form of personalized portrayal displayed the politicians in family contexts and entailed more favorable reactions among the respondents. Despite a certain degree of skepticism towards the agenda behind all personal self portrayals, the display of politicians in family contexts conveyed perceptions of feeling within reach of the politicians. Moreover, many respondents claimed that they viewed the politicians as warm, sympathetic and relatable. One respondent mentioned that the post illustrating Busch with her children made her think of her own mother, and thus, the respondent ascribed Busch with the attributes of her mother, such as stress resistant and multifaceted. This can be correlated with interpreting frames in regards to the schemata of the recipients (Dekker & Scholten, 2017). Accordingly, as the respondent expressed positive reactions towards the politician assembling her mother, we interpret that the interpretation of the family context frame is associated with attributes equaling a good leadership. Hence, we align this with the notion expressed by Aichholzer and Willmann (2020), emphasizing that people prefer to observe similarity traits of politicians they believe contribute to good leadership.

The last frame, Professional Frames with Personal Attributes, generated the most positive reactions and attitudes among all respondents. We argue for the importance of this finding, as all respondents initially expressed their preference towards politicians displaying themselves as solely political. Yet, while observing the posts of Sturgeon, all respondents mentioned her personal attributes in the political settings, and further, expressed their joyousness towards this combination of characteristics. As a result, we are able to argue that the preconceived opinions about how our respondents preferred to consume political communication was replaced by a new preference of portrayal, demonstrating a politician in a professional setting while yet displaying personal attributes such as humor. This finding suggests that this form of humor does not contradict the belief of a serious and trustworthy politician. Furthermore, we find it interesting to observe the different reactions towards Sturgeon in relation to the Swedish politicians. More precisely, the posts of Sturgeon generated far more positive reactions among all respondents, which may be an effect of her anonymity within all focus groups. The fact that all respondents had previous knowledge of

the Swedish politicians may thus have contributed to more negative reactions, which can be seen as a limitation of the study.

Reflecting on our choice of employing theoretical premises of Media Effects and Framing Theory in a new manner, we argue that the qualitative method of our study allowed us to gain deeper insights in how reactions are provoked and further why. If a quantitative method would have been applied, our findings would not demonstrate what factors direct the interpretations, and how certain individual schemata affects various reactions. However, the fact that our chosen method does not allow us to measure the differences of Media Effects in relation to the various posts can be seen as a limitation. Yet, due to the scarce research employing a qualitative approach to analyzing Media Effects, we argue that our study contributes to the field of research by providing nuanced examples of how individuals within Generation Z react to different levels of personalization within political communication.

In regards to previous research, Manning et al. (2017) claim that personalization is an effective way to reach the younger generation. However, we argue that there is a limited amount of research covering the perceptions of personalization. One study conducted by Parmelee et al. (2022) presents favorable reactions towards personalized content, meaning that it leads to closer relationships between politicians and followers. Corresponding with the result presented by Parmelee et al. (2022), a study by Lindholm et al. (2020) presents that viewing politicians as relatable persons entails positive reactions. However, the findings of our study illustrates that personalized content often is encountered with skepticism, indicating that our respondents indeed favor settings of more political character. This correlates with the notion of Winchester et al. (2014), stating that personal content with absence of political relevance may form perceptions of negative character. Further, in regards to relatability, our study discloses that the frame of politicians displaying themselves in a family context have the capacity to give rise to positive associations as several respondents ascribed the politicians with positive personality traits due to their role as parents. We connect this result with the notion of Aichholzer and Willmann (2020), emphasizing that people aspire similarity with their political leader, however only in terms of characteristics that they perceive equals a good leadership. Despite the fact that several respondents ascribed the politicians with favorable personality traits in regards to their role as parents, many still agreed on the fact that they viewed the frame as a strategy to attract voters. As such, we conclude that the solely political frame and the political frame with personal attributes were the most appreciated in regards to our chosen target group.

6.1 Suggestions for Further Research

We acknowledged that the conversations of our focus groups took a new direction when we presented posts published by Sturgeon, and as such, for a future study we suggest analyzing reactions towards posts published by solely unknown politicians. By excluding politicians who are familiar to the respondents, it is possible to analyze solely the effects of framing without questioning previous assumptions. More specifically, a limitation of our paper are the respondent's previous assumptions of the politicians which may affect the results of our study. However, we were aware of this factor during the conduction of the study, and we therefore aimed to present in what ways these preconceived opinions may have affected the results throughout the analysis. Yet another suggestion for future research is to analyze differences in reactions towards politicians' self portrayals between different generations. By doing this, insights in how various age groups relate to personalization within social media would be generated.

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Appendix A: Interview Guide

- Do you follow any politicians in any of their social media channels? Why? / Why not?
- What kind of content would you like to see on politicians' Instagram accounts?

- Can you describe what you see in the picture?
 - How do you perceive the politician based on this picture?
 - What attributes in the picture shape that perception?
 - How do you feel about the politician based on this perception?

- How has your perception towards politician X been affected by the three different portrayals/pictures?

- How does the increased relatability affect your attitude towards the politician?
 - How do you perceive how personalized content affects your perception of the politician's political identity?
 - How does the politician's private content affect their political trustworthiness?
 - Is personality an important part of a politician? In what ways? (or are their political stands what matters?)

- Do you think personalized content is suitable for politicians to post in their social media profiles?
- Are there any types of personal content that you believe is more suitable than others? Why?
- Does the increased understanding of the politician as a private person contribute to a more positive perception of the politician as a whole?

