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Analyzing Citizen Engagement With European Politics Through Social Media

Editors
Pieter de Wilde, Astrid Rasch, and Michael Bossetta

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Editorial

Analyzing Citizen Engagement With European Politics on Social Media

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Abstract
Contributions in this thematic issue focus explicitly on citizens and their online engagement with European politics. For social media research in the European Union, citizens remain an understudied actor type in comparison with political elites or news organizations. The reason, we argue, is four key challenges facing social media research in the European Union: legal, ethical, technical, and cultural. To introduce this thematic issue, we outline these four challenges and illustrate how they relate to each contribution. Given that these challenges are unlikely to dissipate, we stress the need for open dialogue about them. A key part of that involves contextualizing research findings within the constraints in which they are produced. Despite these challenges, the contributions showcase that a theoretical and empirical focus on citizens' social media activity can illuminate key insights into vitally important topics for contemporary Europe. These include civic participation, institutional communication, media consumption, gender inequality, and populism.

Keywords
computational methods; European Union; Facebook; gender; news engagement; populism; social media; Twitter

Issue
This editorial is part of the issue "Analyzing Citizen Engagement With European Politics Through Social Media" edited by Pieter de Wilde (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), Astrid Rasch (Norwegian University of Science and Technology), and Michael Bossetta (Lund University).

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1. Introduction

Within the European Union (EU), the widespread adoption of social media dovetailed with a series of challenges that threatened to undermine the polity. In 2008, a series of economic crises pitted budget contributors against budget receivers, whose citizens rapidly organized anti-austerity protests via social media. In 2014, Eurosceptic politicians skillfully leveraged social media for political campaigning, and their online supporters propelled them to winning over one-fourth of the seats in the European Parliament. Shortly thereafter, tragic scenes of a migrant influx from the Middle East went viral on social media, generating both empathy and anti-Muslim hostility. Today, in an EU comprising one less member state, concerns mount about the role of social media in amplifying conspiracy theories and misinformation in the midst of a public health crisis.

While social media has been integral to the EU's recent trajectory, academic research investigating the relationship between EU citizens and social media has proven difficult to conduct. To date, both citizens as an actor-class and the European dimension of their social media activity have remained under-researched. We asked the academic community to carry out research projects that specifically focus on citizens and their engagement with European politics on social media. The result is an inspiring collection of articles on issues such as populism, gender, online engagement, news consumption, and data accessibility.

In opening this thematic issue, we present our reading of the state of social media research on the EU to situate

the research on citizens along three dimensions: content, context, and activity. When analyzing social media content, scholars interested in studying European politics have adopted two main prisms for conceptualizing Europe in their research designs: *vertical* and *horizontal*. Whereas research adopting a vertical dimension examines the extent to which the content of online discussions explicitly mentions EU-level actors, issues, and processes, the horizontal dimension examines the extent to which citizens' social media engagement within national public spheres is comparable across borders. Social media studies that focus on citizens have, by-and-large, taken the horizontal approach through comparative research designs of national-level phenomena that relate to Europe, rather than a direct analysis of citizens' social media activity as it pertains to the vertical dimension: Brussels, EU institutions, or pan-European events.

Whether scholars approach Europe through a vertical or horizontal lens, the context of their empirical cases can be divided into two groups: *formal* and *extra-parliamentary* politics. Understandably, formal electoral research tends to revolve around the European Parliament elections and, following broader trends in political communication, focuses almost exclusively on political elites. Most of the research on European citizens and social media concentrates around extra-parliamentary politics, such as protest mobilization, discursive participation around controversial topics, and patterns of engagement with political news.

In addition to content and context, we can broadly categorize prior research on citizens based on whether they frame citizens' online activity as *proactive* or *reactive*. Studies of proactive online engagement examine the role of social media in citizen-initiated content, such as the coordination of protests or starting online debates about issues of transnational relevance. Reactive online engagement, meanwhile, refers to studying citizens' social media activity in response to pre-existing content, such as commenting on media articles or reacting to politicians' posts. Studies examining citizens' unprompted, proactive social media conversations find relatively high levels of vertical Europeanization, whereas reactive conversations tend to remain confined to cross-border or domestic issues with little attention to the vertical level.

Synthesizing the results of existing research on social media and European politics in this way, we identify three biases in current approaches to the subject. First, studies on citizens are heavily weighted toward comparative case studies of national contexts, rather than an explicit focus on the EU within these contexts. Second, an actor-type discrepancy exists between studies of formal and extra-parliamentary political processes. Formal electoral studies overly focus on political elites, and therefore our knowledge of citizens' social media activity in the EU is primarily limited to extra-parliamentary politics. Third and related, studies on citizens tend to focus on citizens' proactive engagement with pan-European topics.

To a large extent, these biases can be attributed to four challenges in conducting academic research on citizens' engagement with European politics through social media: legal, ethical, technical, and cultural. We detail these challenges below, and illustrate how each contribution in this thematic issue grappled with them. Thus, our aim with this thematic issue is to contribute both to our substantive knowledge on citizen engagement with European politics as well as our understanding of the current practice of academic research on the theme.

2. Legal Challenges

The cottage industry of opinion mining that started in the early 2010s generated increasing push back in the second half of the 2010s. Privacy agents rang alarm bells, critics warned about the consequences for democracy, and regulators sharpened legislation and oversight. Legal barriers were erected that make it more difficult for commercial interests and researchers to access social media data. In particular, the Cambridge Analytica scandal of 2017 highlighted the ethical complications of studying people's political opinions through social media without the informed consent of users.

The General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR)—the main piece of EU legislation governing privacy online—provides two routes for accessing what people post on social media. The first route is through informed consent. This requires an academic to inform individuals of the research project conducted and get them to agree to being studied. This is extremely arduous given anonymity on social media, difficulties in contacting individuals, and the sheer amount of people who would need to agree to participate in order to make quantitative analysis of the vast amount of material available possible. The second route is through an appeal to the public interest in understanding the role that social media plays in democracy and political accountability. In practice, a norm has developed that this second route allows for studying the behavior of political elites such as political parties and individual politicians online. But it does not allow for studying citizen engagement directly, in the form of analyzing the comments and posts ordinary citizens leave behind online. This will have to be approached indirectly, for example in an aggregated manner through studying the amount of likes that posts by political elites gather.

The contributors to this thematic issue clearly shied away from citing individual posts by citizens online. Heidenreich et al. (2022, p. 129) explicitly articulate how GDPR limits our ability to study citizen engagement with European politics through social media:

> This [GDPR privacy restriction] particularly concerns the actual comments. It is currently impossible to gather information on this aspect, barring any research on the actual contents posted in response to status posts….This also means that we cannot assess what the engagement with EU news, as

operationalized in this study, means in terms of legitimacy or support for the EU as such.

3. Ethical Challenges

Ethical considerations have tended to be an afterthought in social media research. In the early days of social media, the idea that there might even be an ethical component tended to be neglected. Zimmer and Proferes (2014, p. 256) found that only 4% of published articles on Twitter made any explicit mention of ethical considerations—a third of which only to conclude that Twitter data was "public information and thus its collection and use did not require ethical review or special consideration." While attention to ethics may have increased since then, their findings reveal a research community not intuitively attuned to thinking about ethics. As ethics review boards and various field-specific organizations have developed ethical guidelines for a constantly shifting terrain of social media platforms and practices, it is perhaps the still stricter formal GDPR constraints discussed above that have particularly forced researchers to consider the privacy of the people they are studying. For example, Seibicke and Michailidou (2022, p. 102) state: "We refrained from directly identifying and quoting (eponymously or anonymously) individuals," in order not to breach GDPR privacy rules.

A number of studies have pointed to the discrepancy between researchers' perception of the publicity of the data they work with and users' perceptions of their generated content. As Fiesler and Proferes (2018, p. 2) found by asking social media users directly: "The majority of Twitter users in our study do not realize that researchers make use of tweets, and a majority also believe that researchers should not be able to do so without permission." Clearly, this observation is far removed from many researchers' assumptions that anyone who posts on Twitter must be aware that tweets are public and can be used in research. While it would be easy for scholars to point to the Terms and Conditions of the platform, it is well established that these lengthy and changing documents are rarely read or understood by users (Beninger et al., 2014, p. 14). Ethically, if not legally, researchers are obliged to consider whether users can "reasonably expect to be observed by strangers" (Townsend & Wallace, 2016, p. 10). Indeed, researchers may even find themselves torn between following the legal requirement set by Twitter in their Terms and Conditions (i.e., to cite the full text and user handle) and ethical considerations about maintaining users' anonymity (Beninger et al., 2014, p. 33).

The need for ethical awareness increases when it comes to the content produced by vulnerable subjects or regarding sensitive topics. Williams et al. (2017) found that groups that are more likely to be exposed to online harassment such as women, LGBT people, and Black or minority ethnic tweeters were more likely to feel concerned about their posts being used for research. A basic requirement in ethical guidelines is that one should avoid exposing people to risk of harm (Townsend & Wallace, 2016, p. 7). For vulnerable groups, such risk of harm is bound up with their identity so that publicizing the very existence of a person who is Black or gay may put them at risk by potentially bringing them to the attention of trolls or violent groups. Hence, Galpin (2022, p. 168) argues that "the nature of subaltern counter-spheres is often that they cannot be ethically studied without the explicit consent and approval of community members and may need to involve researchers who belong to the communities being analysed."

Regarding ethical challenges, let us finally raise a critical reflection on the relationship between the researcher and the platform. As Srinivasan (2017, p. 1) argues:

> We treat commercial platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, or Google today as if they were public spaces and systems, ignoring that they must remain primarily accountable to their shareholders. These commercial priorities, rather than the diverse publics and cultures, shape how these tools are developed and the agendas they serve.

On the one hand, this should prompt researchers to consider the influence of such agendas on the politics that we study. Who gets to say what, given the agendas and algorithms of the platforms? On the other hand, it should make us scrutinize our own position as researchers. To what extent does our dependence on the platforms to get access to data prevent us from asking critical questions about them? While most contributions in this thematic issue treat platforms as a window through which we can study the political behavior of, and interaction between, political elites and citizens in Europe, Dommett and Tromble (2022) explicitly pick up the role of platforms and the fact that they are not "fully transparent windows." They argue for more academic activism to force platforms to provide access and illustrate how this may be done.

4. Technical Challenges

The relationship between researcher and platform also highlights some of the key technical challenges in studying social media. Researchers, too, are end-users of social media platforms, albeit in a different way than users interfacing with platforms on the front-end. When it comes to researchers' capacity to study social media, our reliance on platform data has been laid bare, most notably through Facebook's throttling of public access to its Graph API. Yet, scholarly reflections in response to that inflection point have generated a stronger critical awareness about how the data made available by platforms subtly work to steer our objects of analysis. This nudging represents the overarching technical challenge to overcome when studying citizens' engagement on social media.

While computational techniques to analyze social media data present a technical challenge for researchers, these barriers are within researchers' control and are thus the easiest to overcome. Like with any methodology, computational methods applied via programs like R or Python require training, practice, and learning-by-doing. Instead, we focus here on more fundamental technical challenges in social media research that relate, in one way or another, to data access and structure. The scale, format, and availability of this data have direct implications for our understanding of citizens' online political engagement.

The first technical challenge is scale. Platforms structure data access to both academics and citizen users alike, in ways that obscure an aggregate-level understanding of citizens' political engagement on social media. Scale, in terms of processing large datasets, can to some extent be solved with increased computational power. However, even if it is possible to gather vast amounts of data, storing and sharing data amongst international collaborative research teams is not without its obstacles, as privacy regulations generally prohibit the storage of social media data. As noted by Özdemir and Rauh (2022, p. 142):

> Managing…large volumes of data entails major logistical problems with regard to storing, sharing, and analyzing the data—especially in a collaborative project. While collaborative coding is tremendously facilitated by services such as our preferred GitHub, such free-of-charge services quickly reach their limits with the amount of data we had to wrangle for the analyses here.

Scale, and how platforms deal with it, is also a challenge as it affects what citizens see on social media. Algorithmic filtering is a widespread business practice to manage and personalize content, resulting in the research limitation noted by Bil-Jaruzelska and Monzer (2022, p.182): "We lack insight into how algorithms promote content and thus influence engagement, which limits our ability to control for confounding factors that drive engagement.''

A second technical challenge is the availability of data, where the power of platforms to influence research on citizens is most visible. On the one hand, platforms can entirely limit access to citizens' data in line with legal and ethical considerations outlined above. For example, Facebook has historically blocked data access to citizens' private networks, and more recently has revoked access to citizens' comments on public pages due to privacy concerns. Thiele (2022, p. 193) notes that:

> Accessing the Facebook API has become more and more difficult for researchers in the past few years. Many social media scholars today are dependent on endeavors like Facepager….Such programs, however, have a precarious status themselves and constantly run the risk of losing the access granted by Facebook. A different problem is the lack of transparency and constant changes of the Facebook API. The data returned sometimes exhibit gaps or skewness for unclear reasons.

The unavailability or uncertainty regarding data completeness not only limits our understanding of citizens' political engagement on the platform, it also drives researchers to focus on Twitter. Platforms' current approach to addressing this technical challenge is the public release of official datasets using anonymization techniques such as differential privacy. Researchers interested in citizens' political engagement should, however, consider the implied normative valence of these datasets. To date, publicly released datasets focus predominantly on understanding disinformation, either through understanding the dissemination strategies of malicious actors (Twitter's Influence Operations datasets) or citizens' fake news sharing (Facebook URLs dataset). Especially in the latter case, access to data is conditional upon researching citizens' misinformation sharing, which steers research toward citizens' negative practices of social media engagement. When seeking to understand the democratic implications of citizens' social media engagement, researchers should also consider how social media activity can positively contribute to democratic norms. But this requires linking very abstract concepts like legitimacy or deliberation to the short and abbreviated reality of actual social media posts. The next section picks up these cultural challenges.

5. Cultural Challenges

By focusing specifically on European politics, this thematic issue fills one of the important gaps in the research about politics on social media. As Bruns et al. (2016, p. 2) note, the US (and to a lesser extent the UK and other Western countries) are overrepresented in the literature on social media and politics. They point out that the American political and media systems are so particular that it is hard to translate the findings on how media are used for political campaigning there to other contexts. "What is necessary instead," they suggest, "is a broad-based, cross-national investigation of social media use in political communication and campaigning that allows for a charting of the similarities and differences in social media adoption and application against the backdrop of specific national…contexts" (Bruns et al., 2016, p. 2).

This is a challenge that many of our contributions pick up on, for example Bene et al. (2022). Wallaschek et al. (2022) illustrate the problems with such a cross-national approach. Data in small countries might not be enough, such as on International Women's Day 2021 in Lithuania. Spain and Ireland have languages that are spoken in multiple countries, making language-based sampling problematic. In short, "Collecting cross-country social media data remains a challenge" (Wallaschek et al., 2022, p. 157).

A key difference here is between cross-national and transnational studies, with the former placing nations alongside one another while the latter is interested also in connections at the sub- and supranational levels (Struck et al., 2011). People engage in political activities and conversations on social media in groupings that do not neatly align with the national community, sometimes being closely connected to their local neighborhood. At other times, this engagement cuts across state borders. Approaching politics on social media through a transnational lens allows those connections between citizens at the local, regional, and supranational levels to come into focus. Bossetta et al. (2017, p. 54) refer to the "transnational promise" of social networking sites "to contribute to instantaneous, cross-border flows of political communication." Such transnational dynamics are explicitly picked up by Özdemir and Rauh (2022) in their study of supranational communication by EU institutions, and by Seibicke and Michailidou (2022) in their reflections on how forms of association with the EU are debated in various countries.

Yet, when carrying out research into such transnational phenomena, we are faced with a number of cultural challenges. Broadly speaking, these relate to the feasibility and desirability of transnational and comparative research. To what extent is it feasible (given the language skills and resource limitations of the researcher) to study different European contexts in one project? And to what extent can these places be meaningfully compared, given the differences in both political culture and social media culture, and what are the pitfalls such a project must avoid?

The first challenge of transnational or comparative research is its feasibility. As researchers in fields like transnational history and comparative literature have discovered, to their chagrin, the scope of a project can become too big to be practicable. Just as there are only so many archives one historian can go to, or so many languages one literary scholar can read, so too are there practical limits that constrain the ambitions of the social media researcher. We do our best to select relevant cases and comparisons, but it remains difficult to assess the generalizability of findings outside of the chosen cases (González-González et al., 2022; Hameleers, 2022). While some of these obstacles may be dealt with by recruiting someone with the necessary skills, the very real problem of funding will often mean that the only solution becomes to scale down the ambitions of the project. Large collaborative projects, such as the one by Bene et al. (2022), make major steps in expanding the cultural space under study. Yet, a single study that includes all European countries remains elusive, and limitations in obtaining EU-wide, comparable information on how politics on social media is similar or different across member states mean we have to generalize to the entire European continent with caution.

Furthermore, we must consider possible limits to the desirability of working across borders. Is there a risk that in the effort to paint the bigger transnational picture we lose local nuances? While European citizens may communicate and organize across national borders, they are still affected by the social and political realities that apply locally and which may affect social media use. Attention to the border-crossing potential of social media should not lead us to fall into the trap of what Chan (2013, p. xi) terms "digital universalism," where we assume that digital culture is the same everywhere. While Chan's research focuses on Peru, the warning applies also to a European framework. Since much existing research on European social media usage focuses on Western Europe, there is a risk in treating one country as a generalizable case, and subsequently comparing to what extent the rest of Europe follows or diverges from one country's model. Any transnational study of social media use must be sensitive to local practices and take care not to see them as derivative of a Western standard.

6. Conclusion

While we are not able to overcome all four of these research challenges in this thematic issue, our aim is to illustrate how a core focus on European citizens' social media engagement can advance social science across multiple fronts: political studies, media studies, and gender studies. Since the outlined challenges are unlikely to dissipate, we stress the need for open dialogue and knowledge sharing about them, so that the strength and limitations of research findings can be contextualized within the constraints in which they are produced. For social media research, the accumulation of knowledge requires not only theoretical and empirical development; it also requires the development and sharing of best practices to overcome the challenges we outline here. In the spirit of open science, we present these challenges at the outset of this thematic issue, and we invite readers to reflect upon them as they read the contributions herein.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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Article

The Challenges of Reconstructing Citizen-Driven EU Contestation in the Digital Media Sphere

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Abstract
This article reflects on the discursive representation, legal, and practical challenges of locating, classifying, and publishing citizens' views of the EU in digital media discourse. We start with the discursive representation challenge of locating and identifying citizens' voices in social and news media discourse. The second set of challenges pertains to the legal, regulatory framework guiding research ethics on personal data but also cuts across the academic debate on what constitutes "public" discourse in the digital public sphere. The third set of challenges are practical but of no less consequence. Here we bring in the issue of marketisation of the public sphere and of the digital commons, and how these processes affect the ethics but also the feasibility and reliability of digital public sphere analysis. Thereby we illustrate that barriers to content analysis can make data collection practically challenging, feeding dilemmas with data reliability and research ethics. These methodological and empirical challenges are illustrated and unpacked with examples from the Benchmark project, which analysed the extent to which citizens drive EU contestation on social and digital news media. Our study focuses on UK public discourse on a possible European Economic Area solution, and the reactions such discourse may have triggered in two EU-associated countries, Norway and Switzerland, in the post-Brexit referendum period 2016–2019. We thus take a broad European perspective of EU contestation that is not strictly confined within the EU public sphere(s). The case study illustrates the research process and the emerging empirical challenges and concludes with reflections and practical suggestions for future research projects.

Keywords
citizen participation; digital content; EU contestation; methods; research ethics; social media

Issue
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1. Introduction

Capturing citizen-driven contestation of the EU has always been a challenge in European public sphere research, not least because the very existence of a European public sphere has been the subject of scholarly dispute for nearly three decades (Baisnée, 2007; Risse & van de Steeg, 2003; Scharpf, 1994). Even when accepting a European public sphere exists on the basis of some minimum standards, the voice of citizens is difficult to capture due to the practical, legal, and methodological challenges that public discourse (or claims) analysis entails, in general, and in the more specific context of digital communications (Michailidou & Trenz, 2013). At first glance, some of these challenges might not seem like challenges at all. And while they are not likely to be insurmountable, we follow the editors' call in this thematic issue to report honestly and self-critically on the challenges we have met and how they have affected our research design and research practice (de Wilde et al., 2022). We do so by reflecting on the whole research process of a specific project in order to illustrate and suggest some solutions

to issues such as data collection, data processing, and data dissemination.

The Benchmark project analyses the extent to which EU contestation in the digital media sphere in the period 2016–2019 was driven by citizens. We chose to focus on digital media, specifically social media and online news media, for the following reasons: Legacy media (news media from the pre-digital era), such as newspapers, are traditionally channels for opinion formation and, as such, have also been the focus of research on EU politicisation, public legitimacy, and contestation (Boomgaarden et al., 2013; de Wilde, 2019; de Wilde et al., 2013; Galpin & Trenz, 2019; Gattermann & de Vreese, 2020; Schuck et al., 2011). Furthermore, in recent years, research into citizens' EU contestation and media discourses has increasingly highlighted the importance of social media platforms as alternative news sources, in which politically relevant discourses are constructed (e.g., Barisione & Michailidou, 2017). While digital media have widely been hailed as potentially enhancing active citizen empowerment, this article reflects on some of the challenges that researchers might encounter and need to be aware of when empirically analysing citizens' discourses in the digital media sphere. The multiple discursive representations, legal, and practical challenges media scholars are confronted with when analysing citizens' views of the EU in digital media discourse are the subject of continuous academic scrutiny, as the light-speed digital public sphere constantly changes. We examine these three distinct yet interrelated challenges by drawing on our empirical research into Brexit contestation as this unfolded in professional (online) news media and on the social media platform Twitter.

The first challenge, the discursive representation challenge, relates to the difficulty of locating and identifying citizens' voices in social and news media discourse. In the era of "post-truth politics," we know there are "fake" social media and user profiles that spread fake news. We also know there are well-intentioned individuals whose claims may be distorted or that they themselves may share unverified information. When trying to understand the ways in which the legitimacy of the EU is contested in the public sphere, is it necessary to have the technical skills to be able to distinguish claims that are fake or distorted? This is not only a technical challenge but also one that affects the essence of the EU legitimacy discourse. To what extent is the distinction between "true" and "fake" relevant for our analysis of EU public legitimation? Another challenge stems from the issue of the representativity of online discourse. Despite their democratising promise, social media platforms have not quite levelled the playing field between traditional opinion leaders (politicians, journalists, public intellectuals) and the average citizen. Instead, they have contributed to the amplification of these traditional public sphere voices, whereby public opinion influencers capitalise on their political or celebrity status to command the attention of millions in the digital public sphere. Yet this type of influence depends on its heavy monetisation for survival, constituting a digital version of consumer democracy (Murdock, 2017), as opposed to the more empowered concept of the consumer-producer of news, or "produser" (Bruns & Highfield, 2012). As the digital divides of the early internet days intensify, we further observe that, despite the promise that social media initially held of a low threshold for participation in public discourse, younger cohorts are tending to opt-out of participation or self-censor, in order to avoid the hostile, often abusive, environment of digital debate on social media (Kruse et al., 2018). In any case, after the optimism of the digital public sphere's early days (e.g., Trenz, 2009), it is difficult to argue today that social media have brought the end of public sphere elites. This then creates considerable challenges of representativeness and reliability with media analysis when trying to gain insight into the extent of citizen engagement in EU contestation in digital news media.

The second set of challenges pertains to the legal and regulatory framework surrounding research ethics and personal data issues. Here we focus specifically on the requirements for general data protection regulation (GDPR) and national guidelines for managing research data. Today's empiricists need to make specific data protection provisions to get approval for analysing digital data texts, not only those harvested from social media but also newspapers. We then reflect on the implications these requirements have for our research. Can they, for example, impose limitations that could undermine the reliability of the findings? Could they even limit the ability to conduct this type of analysis at all? Moreover, what are the implications for tight research schedules and project budgets?

Finally, yet just as importantly, we consider the practical challenges connected to collecting data for content analysis. In an age of increasing emphasis on free software, free culture, and public domain works, as well as open data and open access to science on the one hand, and intensive marketisation and commercial exploitation of digital spaces, digitally disseminated content, and user metadata on the other hand (Couldry & Hepp, 2017), digital data can be more difficult to access than one would expect. Online newspaper articles are, for example, increasingly hidden behind paywalls. While once a media researcher could simply access newspaper archives and download articles for text analysis, restricted accessibility entails additional permissions, requires new qualifications and greater technical ability for the data collection, and incurs additional research costs. Thus, while there is a huge amount of data "out there," media researchers need to have the funds and skillsets to access it.

The structure of the article is as follows. In Section 2, we review the current state of the art literature on these issues. Section 3 then reflects critically on our own experiences conducting mixed-method, multi-lingual empirical digital media and text analysis. We draw from

our experience gained during the Benchmark project (2018–2021). Based on our insight from the research process and findings, we finish with a discussion before concluding.

2. The Challenges of Digital Media Analysis

2.1. The Discursive Representation Challenge

The multiple aspects of political life—the information about it, the debate concerning it, and the channels for influencing it—are increasingly found online (Karlsson, 2021, p. 237). The impact of information technology on citizen participation in public debate and political processes is well documented and has given rise to concepts such as "digital democracy" (Asenbaum, 2019), "online civic commons" (Gastil & Richards, 2016), and "digital public sphere" (Schäfer, 2015), to name but a few.

Despite the democratic optimism that several of these conceptual and empirical approaches of the digital public sphere hold, the challenges that digitalisation entails for the democratic public sphere are also highlighted and described in detail, especially in recent years, as extremism and misinformation have further amplified disparities in participation and discursive representation (e.g., Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Vaccari & Valeriani, 2021). Kruse et al. (2018) have shown that social media users often avoid political discourse online for fear of harassment, preferring interactions with those holding similar political views, or wanting to keep social media a place for positive interactions.

Another challenge relates to the hierarchical form of interaction. As Young (2002, p. 171) already pointed out almost two decades ago, "in societies with social and economic inequalities, when there is a public sphere, it tends to be dominated, both in action and ideas, by more privileged groups." As also discussed in the introductory article of this thematic issue, certain social media platforms, such as Twitter, while undoubtedly enabling and easing citizens' access to political discourse, have also entrenched this asymmetrical power through dominance (in terms of the disproportionate visibility and influence) of tweets generated by public actors who already enjoy power in the public sphere (Dagoula, 2019, p. 230; Fuchs, 2014, p. 191). Researchers must then ask themselves, how can (social) media researchers treat online political discourses as representative articulations of citizens' political opinions if our data is so skewed? Thus, there is a significant caveat when using "big data," as it can bias the picture of whose voices, opinions, and behaviour are represented in public discourse. More critical awareness and honesty are needed of the potential sampling biases and lack of representativeness that stem from basing data collection on digital media platforms (see Hargittai, 2020; Iliadis & Russo, 2016).

Another issue of the authenticity of online discourse is that social media platforms have become more than just spaces for users to interact. In recent years, digital news consumption has seen a steady increase. However, concern for misinformation is deep across the democratic world, with governments, journalist organisations, and civil society actors driving multiple efforts (often based on transnational collaboration) to safeguard the integrity of the democratic public sphere from mis-, dis-, and malinformation (see, for instance, European Commission, 2020; or https://www.faktisk.no, an initiative by Norwegian journalists).

We summarise these issues under the term "discursive representation" challenge. Discursive representation is understood here as: (a) whose voice is visible in the public sphere, generally, and in public discourses pertaining to the EU's legitimacy more specifically; and (b) in whose name these actors/voices speak. The way we deploy the term "discursive representation" then is along the lines of Michailidou and Trenz's (2013) take on "audience democracy" rather than Dryzek and Niemeyer's (2008) narrower definition of "discursive representation." We return to these discursive representation challenges in Section 3, where we discuss the multi-text source strategy we deployed in the Benchmark project to limit the effect of these quandaries on our analysis of post-Brexit referendum debate regarding a possible European Economic Area-like solution for the UK.

2.2. Legal Challenge

Research ethics are a key aspect of social science, and digital media—especially social media—research has put issues of ethical data collection, data storage, and user consent into sharper focus. Given this vast, expanding area of research, scholars need to acquire new skills to explore and analyse their findings and situate them into their appropriate contexts, but they also need to be able to make appropriate ethical considerations for their research (Quan-Haase & Sloan, 2017). While new technologies enable novel and innovative approaches to research, they also create unique challenges for the responsible use of this data.

In the early days of social media research, the openness of social media platforms might have given the impression that social media data was "public and therefore did not require the same level of ethical scrutiny than more standard data, resulting in that published papers could include complete tweets and usernames without informed user consent" (Beninger, 2017). The issue of informed consent is now a common problem in contemporary "big data" projects. GDPR rights apply to all persons whose data is processed throughout the course of a research project. GDPR rules pose practical challenges regarding user consent when there are potentially hundreds and thousands of individuals who would have to be contacted with consent forms. At the same time, users may operate in public spaces but expect respect for their privacy. In a survey, Williams et al. (2017) found that four in five social media users expect to be asked for their consent to their data being used by

researchers. However, how can this practically be done with potentially thousands and, in some cases, millions of data points? Put simply by boyd and Crawford (2012, p. 672), “it may be unreasonable to ask researchers to obtain consent from every person who posts a tweet, but it is problematic for researchers to justify their actions as ethical simply because the data are accessible.” The question confronting social media researchers thus is, just because it is possible, does that make it legal? And just because it is legal, does that make it ethical? The ethical guidelines provided by the Association of Internet Researchers (franzke et al. 2020, p. 10) point to some risk mitigation strategies available to researchers: at the stage of data collection (through first-degree informed consent), data storage (anonymisation), or at the dissemination stage (consent of a smaller selection of specific subjects).

Another challenge stems from the fact that GDPR rules apply in all EU countries, yet the guidelines can be interpreted differently not just across countries but *within* countries by different research ethics bodies. When conducting research across institutional and national boundaries, which rules should be followed if they are different? Those of the institutions conducting the research, or those from which data is collected? Given these complexities surrounding legal and ethical challenges of digital media analysis, grant funders (such as the Research Council of Norway or the European Research Council and the European Commission) have improved their guidelines. Now, detailed data management protocols are required as part of the funding process, and the responsibility for compliance with GDPR and national regulations now lies with the leading institution of transnational projects. This provides some clarity, at least, in terms of which sets of national guidelines take precedence in multi-partner research projects, but it does not completely resolve the complexities that arise in practical terms, as we discuss in the following sections.

2.3. Practical/Technical Challenge

Another set of complex challenges lie in the practical execution of gauging citizen participation through digital media analysis. These are related to the detailed elements and steps of the research design, from data collection, data storage, to data analysis. Despite digital media analysis increasingly being used in the social sciences, it can be a struggle to find the “right way” to go about it. Without a clear approach to follow, social media research particularly can be a difficult experience for scholars embarking on work in this field (Baldwin et al., in press, p. 2). Yet, it is precisely this absence of a uniform or standardised methodological approach that affords relative freedom for researchers to explore different research designs and techniques. Therefore, we do not wish to argue in favour of a standardised methodology for digital sociological research. What we do wish to highlight here—and where we believe is a need for consensus, if not standardisation—is the need for continuous sharing and discussion of the unique practical and technical reality that shapes methodological decisions in digital public sphere research. Today, a major obstacle to conducting digital media analysis is one of accessing data. While it used to be straightforward to download large amounts of social media data from Twitter or Facebook, or to download online news articles, this is no longer possible (Tromble, 2021). Most news content is now behind paywalls, and social media platforms such as Twitter have restricted or removed access to their historical archives whilst also implementing an often-aggressive monetisation strategy toward the metadata their users generate.

This brings the related challenge of researchers needing to be (or to collaborate with someone who is) proficient in computational social science methods, such as data scraping, data preparation for analysis, and data manipulation (Mayr & Weller, 2016). Moreover, chosen data collection approaches must comply with data protection rules and regulations. In the case of the EU/European public sphere, the challenge of technical competence in big data collection and analysis is compounded by the multi-lingual environment from which researchers need to draw their data.

3. Addressing the Challenges: The Case of the Benchmark Project

The Benchmark project was financed by the Research Council of Norway’s initiative “Europe in Transition” (EUROPA), for the period 1 November 2018–31 October 2021, and was a sub-project of the EU-funded EURODIV (“Integration and Division: Towards a Segmented Europe?”) project. The project involved a cross-interdisciplinary network of researchers coordinated by the ARENA Centre for European Studies at the University of Oslo (UiO). The central research question was whether Brexit affects the relationship between EU members and non-member democracies, and if so, how? Benchmark takes a discursive approach toward the empirical analysis of official documents, parliamentary and media debates, as well as Twitter posts (tweets) to trace public claims about the implications of different EU relationships. The concepts of democracy, legitimacy, and justice are at the core of this inquiry.

The data, being both structured (news articles) and semi- or unstructured texts (speeches, tweets) in four languages (English, French, German, and Norwegian), and collected from UK, Norwegian, and Swiss sources, was analysed through quantitative and qualitative methods (Table 1).

All collected news and parliamentary texts were uploaded and stored in an ElasticSearch database, purpose-designed for the needs of the Benchmark project by UiO’s Centre for Information Technology (USIT) team. For the Twitter component, we used data collected in the period August 2015–September 2016, using

Table 1. Data sources.

Country	Newspapers		Parliaments			Total
UK	Guardian 24,900	Daily Mail 58,730	Hansard-House of Lords 295	Hansard-House of Commons 24	Parliamentary committees 3,305	87,254
Norway	Aftenposten 1,060	VG 691	Stortinget 103			1,854
Switzerland	20 Minuten/20 minutes 312	Tagesanzeiger 1,035	Nationalrat/Conseil national 24			1,347

hashtagify.me to track and collect tweets marked with the hashtag #Brexit and associated hashtags (tweets were collected through Twitter's REST API, with the parameter "all tweets" selected to avoid data bias towards big influencers or any sampling biases/errors). The monitoring period lasted 151 days and resulted in over 5.3 million tweets being collected through Twitter's public API, including original messages and retweets. The #Brexit hashtag was analysed for sentiment, visibility, and impressions (calculated on the basis of retweets and mentions within the whole #Brexit network; see Cybranding, 2021).

3.1. The Discursive Representation Challenge: Reflexive Qualitative Analysis of News and Parliamentary Debates With Nvivo

To get a more complete picture of the potential impact of citizens' participation in political contestation, we included more traditional sources of public discourse in our dataset to gauge the visibility of citizen-generated inputs or views in the professional public spheres of news media and parliaments. We created seven code categories, each containing up to 90 words associated with the code (see Table 2 for an overview of codes). An eighth binary code (positive/negative) was also included to capture overall sentiment within each text (not of the specific claims at this stage). We generated the codebook through concept mapping of relevant texts compiled in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, as well as adjusting the semantic analysis system and tagset developed by the University of Lancaster (see http://ucrel.lancs.ac.uk/usas).

A claim needs to have an actor "making" it. In other words, narratives about alternative Brexit scenarios involving EEA (European Economic Area), CETA (Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement), EFTA (European Free Trade Association), or Norway+ type of agreements with the UK have to be "performed" in the public sphere to contribute to public opinion formation. In our operationalisation, a single actor can only make one claim in any given time and space. Moreover, an actor may transmit their opinion directly by saying it or indirectly if their opinion is featured by the writer of the text. The territorial level (national, EU, international, third country, etc.) that the actor is acting upon (particularly applicable to politicians) was recorded in our coding scheme (using annotations to specify territorial level if an actor is not operating at the "national" level).

The purpose of the qualitative claims-making processing of our data was to provide nuanced analysis regarding preferred public narratives on alternative scenarios for Brexit and a basis upon which to compare such narratives. We were thus interested not only in a comparison by countries and sources (which could be achieved by the quantitative analysis alone) but in justifications (claims) used by *different types of actors* who expressed their (dis)approval of Norway or Switzerland-type post-Brexit models based on abstract concepts (standards).

The coding process focused in the first instance on the content of tweets only. User metadata was analysed through hashtagify.me to obtain a list of top influencers within the #Brexit Twittersphere. The coding schedule involved four codes for justice tweets and four for expertise tweets (Table 3), which were based on the public claims structure described earlier. The code "Reference" was used to classify "residue" tweets that only vaguely alluded to either concept without offering sufficient clues to allow for more specific categorisation.

We were able to allocate resources for human coders, which possessed the specifically required language skills, but also a range of competences in quantitative and qualitative analysis. This allowed us, on the one hand, to override the challenge of having to machine- or manually translate the texts into English before coding. On the other hand, our interdisciplinary—particularly in

Table 2. Overview of codes.

Code 1	Brexit process	Code 5	Democratic institutions
Code 2	Party politics	Code 6	Other
Code 3	Economics	Code 7	Legitimacy (positive/negative)
Code 4	Judiciary/laws/treaties	Code 8	Sentiment

Table 3. Classification codes for justice and expertise tweets.

Justice-themed tweets	Non-domination	Impartiality	Mutual recognition	Reference
Expertise-themed tweets	Expertise–positive	Expertise–negative	Soft expertise	Reference

terms of methods—research team combined expertise in linguistics, algorithmic analysis, and discourse analysis, with a theoretical/conceptual background in EU contestation and public legitimation. These skills were used to address the discursive representation and practical challenges of capturing, not only the content of EU public contestation, but also the meta-issues of legitimation, voice visibility, and the interconnectedness of diverse public spheres.

3.2. The Legal Challenge: GDPR and Processing of Personal Data

Understanding public opinion formation through the media can only happen through the analysis of media content. The topic of Benchmark (Brexit and legitimacy-forming processes through public discourse) contributes critical knowledge regarding the mechanisms through which possible solutions to Brexit, which also affects the future of the whole of the EU, become accepted or rejected in the public sphere. To this end, Benchmark collected structured and unstructured texts (news and parliamentary transcripts, as well as tweets) to conduct concept mapping and qualitative content analysis. The raw material collected contained names of journalists, politicians, and other actors who had made public statements. We were not interested in the names of individuals or identifying them in the final datasets, reports, or publications. Our research was mainly reported as aggregate data, which scores the frequency with which abstract concepts of legitimacy, democracy, rights, and sovereignty were used in public debate on Brexit. Nevertheless, the names were included in the raw material for which we were given permission to download from news and parliament websites. For the data-processing phase, we allocated codes on individuals so that we could identify which group of actors they belong to (journalists, politicians, citizens, and also political or newspaper affiliation). The research team, therefore, had access to individuals' names in the raw material, but this information was not made public. The one exception for which we considered departing from this strict anonymisation was in potential scientific publications, where—based on our research—we might have wanted to quote a political opinion for illustrative purposes and name the person expressing the opinion. However, we refrained from this, even in the cases we identified where an opinion had already been manifestly made public by data subjects themselves: namely authors of newspaper articles, speakers in parliamentary debates, and the Twitter accounts of public personas (such as politicians or journalists). Since these are opinions they have manifestly made public themselves and are in the public interest to be known and scrutinised, obtaining their consent to refer to them in our publicly-funded research was neither deemed necessary nor customary in politics and media discourse analysis. We felt that it would create additional research costs and make the research process exceedingly cumbersome. Crucially, it would have endangered the freedom of research, potentially enabling individuals in public office positions to hinder the analysis and publication of the reasoning they use to reach decisions that have direct implications for public policy and the public interest. Consequently, while directly quoting individuals in the public sphere would have added reliability and richness to our publications, we felt that the Norwegian Centre for Research Data's (NSD) and GDPR rules were too prohibitive to take any risks.

Moreover, the focus of the project was not on individuals but on opinions circulating in the public sphere. The names and background information were collected as part of the raw data (text news articles) that we analysed. Category codes were assigned to opinions so that we could have an overview of what categories of individuals made which types of political claims. We refrained from directly identifying and quoting (eponymously or anonymously) individuals. Furthermore, we provided information about our project and obtained written permission from the newspapers to collect news articles from their websites. Since we felt that it was impractical to obtain consent from all individuals mentioned in the news articles, we provided information about our project and its aims to, and obtained permission from, the newspapers before collecting news articles from their websites. We thus resolved the legal challenge of ensuring compliance with the NSD guidelines and GDPR rules by taking steps to ensure that the rights of individuals identifiable in any way in the texts we process were safeguarded. These steps were formally outlined in the project's data collection plan and approved by the NSD.

In the course of our analysis, we only temporarily stored information on individuals whose names and statements appeared in the documents that we analysed. We have included this relevant piece of information in a disclaimer published on the project's webpage, where we further included a declaration that GDPR rights apply for all persons whose data we would be processing throughout the course of the project (see articles 15–21 of the GDPR; Regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council of 27 April 2016, 2016). This entails that all such persons have the right to:

- Ask for access to their personal data being processed.

- Request that their personal data be deleted.
- Request that incorrect personal data is corrected/rectified.
- To receive a copy of their personal data (data portability).

A full list of the texts by title, source, and country will be uploaded on the project website at the end of the project, to make it easier for individuals to determine if they are affected by our work in the context of GDPR guidelines.

3.3. The Technical/Practical Challenge: From Big Data on #Brexit to Qualitative Analysis of EU Legitimacy

Obtaining text is a domain- and task-dependent process in which we needed to take into account the individual copyright and terms-of-access conditions of the data sources. For our news and Twitter data, we relied on application programming interfaces (APIs) to access and download texts. All the newspaper platforms we included in our study allow users to search news articles by entering key search terms (and in some instances to specify dates) in a URL and return data in a structured format (usually a list of URLs with relevant articles). However, while in some instances we encountered a paywall (Tagesanzeiger), the access was also often restricted in terms of downloading content/volume and frequency of downloads. We thus contacted the newspapers, requesting permission to scrape large quantities of text from their websites. In the case of the Tagesanzeiger, the editorial team sent PDF documents with compiled articles by year. While The Guardian and 20 Minutes gave their permission, the Daily Mail did not reply, but neither were we blocked from scraping its website. The data from the Norwegian newspapers were gathered with the newsgathering tool Retriever, which has access to most digital articles published by Norwegian news media.

For the Twitter component of our analysis, we purchased the raw #Brexit data from hashtagify.me, together with the influence metrics for the #Brexit cluster. We then worked with UiO’s USIT team to apply automated classification using Python, whereby the tweets database was filtered according to pre-determined keywords (the abstract concepts of justice and expertise, as well as EU keywords that were used as indicators of relevance to EU contestation). Justice, expertise, and EU keywords were defined using a simplified dictionary method (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013), whereby selected scholarly works compiled in the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy were processed in order to identify the words and phrases associated with “justice” and “expertise” (concept mapping). We subsequently cross-referenced these words with dictionary definitions and synonyms lists for “justice” and “expertise” (Oxford English Dictionary), as well as the Timestamped JSI web corpus 2014–2018 by Sketch Engine (Sketch Engine, n.d.), which comprises over 31 billion words drawn from the web. The final, though not exhaustive, list comprised 10 keywords or phrases (and their variations) relevant to the EU: 55 for justice and 17 for expertise. After several rounds of filtering (cleaning retweets and deduplication), we were left with 2,068 original #Brexit tweets that referred to the EU and the notions of justice and expertise.

4. Discussion

This article aimed to actively reflect on how the interrelated challenges outlined above work to shape our research design and process of capturing and analysing citizens’ engagement with the EU through digital media.

Regarding the practical and technical challenges, we found that working with variations of claims-making analysis was a reliable method to capture actors, claims, and their justifications regarding the legitimacy (or lack thereof) of the EU policy. This method also allows for a fair amount of standardisation of coding across the multi-lingual datasets and among different coders while also allowing for a substantial degree of freedom so that each coder could adjust the codebook to the needs and context of the specific language dataset they were working with.

Nevertheless, our methodology of content analysis of multi-lingual, multi-source digital data was certainly not short of challenges. With computer-assisted content analysis, the quality of research can undoubtedly be improved in terms of reliability and validity. With automated text analysis, it is not just easier to analyse text but also to retrieve vast amounts of it as a first step. However, the word “automatic” in automatic text analysis does not imply that little researcher effort is needed, nor does it mean that manual coding becomes superfluous. In fact, although running an off-the-shelf topic-modelling algorithm on an existing corpus can be done in minutes, it takes much effort to prepare and, especially, to validate the outcome of these methods (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013). The same holds for dictionary and other rule-based analyses. Manual coding is required to create validation material, and supervised machine learning approaches also require a substantial amount of coded training examples (van Atteveldt et al., 2019, p. 2). A disclaimer published on the project’s webpage included a critique of this approach, pointing out that:

> For the time being, there are still major limitations with the type of content analysis that computer software can yield. They are extremely powerful in performing mechanical exercises such as providing word frequencies but far less capable of providing demanding interpretation and contextualisation. This is why fully computerised content analysis is currently a chimera. (Pashakhanlou, 2017, p. 453)

So, while we recognise that automated content methods allow for the systematic analysis of a large corpus of text, we argue that the complexity of language means

they cannot replace, but rather amplify and facilitate the careful, in-depth analysis of the claims made within the texts. We found that a mixed-method approach allows for (a) the collection and analysis of big data, (b) rigorous analysis of abstract concepts, and (c) more reliable sampling. This method, however, does require comprehensive groundwork for the creation of a reliable list of vocabulary for the quantitative component. Moreover, multi-lingual projects require extensive and time-consuming manual inputs; as yet, there is no tool available with 100% linguistic coverage.

The complexities of large text corpora analysis aside, the perpetual discursive representation challenge persists when it comes to unpacking the dynamics of the European public sphere: Whose voice is heard, and how do we as researchers contribute to amplifying these voices? How to quantitatively capture abstract concepts such as EU legitimacy, justice, or expertise? What became clear in the process is that the media debates reflected an *elite discourse* rather than *citizen engagement*. Even though the aim of Benchmark was not analysing citizen engagement but EU contestation in the public sphere, we had hoped to find evidence that citizens' views find their way in public discourse. Regrettably, such evidence is scant. Even away from professional news platforms, top influencers of the #Brexit Twittersphere were national or international professional news organisations (e.g., the BBC, Reuters, The Guardian, the Wall Street Journal). Public intellectuals were also present, together with some alt-right influencers, most of whose accounts have since been suspended or deleted. Polarisation along the Brexit/no-Brexit lines and little nuancing beyond that, as well as mirroring of the "traditional" news media sphere, are thus the characteristics of the #Brexit thread, instead of pluralism of both opinions and actors.

Similarly to previous findings about diffuse Euroscepticism (de Wilde et al., 2013; Michailidou et al., 2014), the analysis of justice-relevant tweets confirms a widespread dissatisfaction with the (perceived or real) status quo; an expression of a generalised sense of unfairness that is not further specified, or qualified, or even directed at a particular group or institution. These large, residual, and negative in tone categories seemingly reaffirm the role of participatory/social media as platforms for mobilising public opinion, frequently—but not exclusively—driven by grievances or complaints. If we take into account the empirically grounded knowledge about the self-censoring and self-silencing of many for fear of attracting trolls, online abuse, and threats (e.g., Carter Olson & LaPoe, 2018; Powers et al., 2019), it would be too simplistic to assume that those who do not actively participate in social media exchanges (even by simply retweeting a message) are content with the way that the issue at hand is being dealt with by political actors.

At the same time, careful consideration of the ethical underpinnings in collecting and storing massive amounts of user-generated content, even if technically possible, is needed. Tackling this legal and ethical challenge needs to start with a proper assessment of the ethical dimensions of any social media project in which it is important to include team members who have this kind of expertise. Closely working with the national research ethics body (such as the NSD in Norway) from the start of a project will pay dividends, as doing so allows researchers to ensure from the beginning that their approach will comply with GDPR and related legislation pertaining to digital content, thus saving time and valuable funding.

In the Benchmark project, we refrained from directly identifying public persons in the project's reports and publications, wherever this was possible, even though this is not explicitly against GDPR and NSD rules and guidelines. We have found that this option minimises the likelihood that we will inadvertently cause damage or distress to an individual and the possibility that we might find ourselves embroiled in a legal dispute with a public actor over our right (or not) to quote them directly. While not detrimental to the quality of our analysis, such a decision does reduce to some extent the richness and accessibility of our text. In other instances, unrelated to our project, the choice between protecting a public actor's right to anonymity and the right to opt out from a research project has had very serious implications. The only way to ensure that GDPR and related legal frameworks do not hinder social sciences research that has direct benefits for democracy is to maintain a constant dialogue between the academic and regulatory sides on matters of protection of privacy versus protection of academic freedom and the public interest.

Nevertheless, even if we get the "all clear" from the NSD, questions as to whether it is ethical or not to pay for data harvesting and social media analytics remain. Future research into this topic needs to consider what parameters should be considered in order to retain the ethics of research. One parameter is externally imposed restrictions. The more barriers news and social media platforms erect against the harvesting of their content, the more complex it becomes for researchers to collect data which in turn feeds challenges that have to do with costs and feasibility, but also reliability of data. Similarly, if professional news providers and platforms maintain paywalls and copyright restrictions for researchers, costs go up for data harvesting, occasionally making the research prohibitive for scholars with smaller budgets. In terms of representativeness, if a researcher's default choice is to harvest what is freely available, one cannot always be confident they capture the most relevant news content.

A way for researchers to balance out the obstacles and ethical dilemmas raised in their path by the marketisation of the public sphere is to make their methods and findings transparent and available to their peers. For the Benchmark project, we will be uploading the codebooks and the list of texts analysed on the project webpage. Although this step does not eliminate the dilemmas associated with paying for and collecting user-generated data,

it does give an advantage to future researchers who may wish to engage with the same topics in that it reduces the need for them to use new resources for gathering and processing the same or similar data.

Finally, the discursive representation challenge was related to the difficulty of locating and identifying citizens' voices in social and news media discourse. Moreover, the challenges related to whose voice is heard and how we as researchers contribute to amplifying these voices. It must be noted that citizens' voices can be captured and heard in many ways: through elections, in public opinion surveys, protests, and social movements, to name but a few. However, what we are interested in are citizens' voices in the digital(ised) public sphere, their contributions to direct and indirect public debate and contestation, and thereby public opinion formation, of the EU polity and its representative legitimacy (or lack thereof; see also de Wilde et al., 2013; de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Michailidou & Trenz, 2013). The digital public sphere opens new channels where we can listen to citizens' voices directly, such as in the comments section of websites, Facebook pages, or Twitter. Social media platforms such as YouTube or Twitter allow individuals who are otherwise previously unknown in the public arena to create an influential digital presence.

In addition to these digital public spaces where we can capture citizens' views directly, it remains a key element of citizen contestation of the EU to look at how other actors (established public actors such as politicians and journalists) mention citizens' views in the public interventions. While the former (direct citizen inputs into the public sphere) is a more attractive opportunity for researchers to investigate public contestation of the EU's legitimacy, it is also more challenging to operationalise due to the restrictions that digital news media and social platforms have implemented regarding the collection of information from their websites. For example, collecting readers' comments used to be fairly straightforward, but nowadays, permission would have to be obtained by the (usually third-party) facilitator of the comment sections of digitally available newspapers. The likelihood of obtaining such permission is slim as most news providers are very reluctant, if not hostile, to the idea of allowing readers' inputs to be collected from their website due to GDPR and earlier legal frameworks that guide data protection. The possibilities vanish altogether if the comment sections are facilitated by a third-party provider such as Disqus.

Similarly, strict restrictions apply in the case of most social media platforms, although some allowances are afforded to academic researchers. For these reasons, as well as from an ethical perspective (i.e., even if it is allowed, is it good research practice to use an individual as the subject of published research without their explicit consent?), we have prioritised looking for "indirect citizens" voices in the form of journalists either including personal views or reporting on public opinion polls on the legitimacy of the EU polity. We also looked for public actors making claims that they represent and speak on behalf of citizens. Including Twitter has given us the possibility to capture citizens' voices more directly. It also gave us an opportunity to observe and code interactions between citizens and public actors with established and influential profilers not only on social media but in the public sphere and political life more broadly. We found that even though one can publish their views on Twitter, if these views do not originate from an established public actor or a "Twitterpreneur" (an influential user who has amassed a large following despite not being a previously well-known public figure), the chances of having one's voice heard are virtually non-existent.

This article set out to honestly reflect on the challenges of analysing citizens' voices in EU-related digital discourse. During the Benchmark project, we encountered challenges ranging from the conceptual and ethical to the technical and practical. And while future research of citizens' voices in the public sphere is set to be a challenging undertaking, we hope our reflections can contribute to this important and worthwhile endeavour.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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Article

The Polyphonic Sounds of Europe: Users' Engagement With Parties' European-Focused Facebook Posts

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Abstract
It is an old concern in public and academic debates that people are not interested in European-level issues, and even European Parliamentary election campaigns, which are the main democratic tools of the European Union (EU) to involve ordinary people into political decision-making, are mostly about national-level political topics. Moreover, even when European issues emerge, the context of its discussion is often harmful to European integration and strengthens the perceived importance of domestic politics. In the age of social media, however, users' content preferences may significantly affect the presence of different political levels in political campaigns, but these preferences are still largely uncovered in academic literature. To fill this gap, we investigate the direct and moderated effects of European-focused Facebook posts on user engagement drawing upon a content analysis dataset including 9,688 posts of 68 parties from 12 EU countries. In line with the well-known second-order election hypothesis (Reif & Schmitt, 1980) we hypothesize a negative direct main effect. However, we also assume that this effect is moderated by several content-, and party-level factors, and when people engage with European-level contents they do it with those ones that are posted by populist parties, focused on a few divisive hot topics, and are framed with a negative tone. Moreover, we expect cross-country differences. We find that on the whole, user engagement with national-level political content prevails over the European-level, but in some countries there are no remarkable differences in user engagement patterns of the two levels. While our findings mostly confirm the second-order election hypothesis, they also demonstrate that European politics can spread within social media platforms in a less divisive and negative way than we expected. European-focused posts do not perform better when they are posted by populist parties, focused selectively on the salient issues of immigration or environment, or framed in a negative way.

Keywords
campaign; comparative research; destructive visibility; European politics; Facebook; political communication; second-order election; social media; user engagement

Issue
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1. Introduction

It is a long-standing concern that the European-level is of secondary importance behind the national-level in European politics, even in the case of European Parliament (EP) elections (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). Scholars argue that this fact contributes to the democratic deficit of the European Union (EU; Follesdal & Hix, 2006) and is therefore a barrier to the development and deepening of the European integration process. This second-order character of European politics can be partly explained by communication-related factors. Both mass media (de Vreese et al., 2006) and political actors (parties and politicians; Haßler et al., 2020) focus primarily on the national level, and even EU-related issues and elections are "domestified" (Boomgaarden et al., 2013) and framed in an "ethnocentric" way (Trimithiotis, 2020). Moreover, the communication context of EU-level issues that emerge in the public sphere is often harmful to the European project and even increase the perceived importance of domestic political level as they are raised by populist parties (Van Kessel, 2015), framed in a negative way (Seddone et al., 2019), and discussed only in relation to some specific divisive topics (Senninger & Wagner, 2015). In the last few years, however, the political communication environment has significantly transformed, and it is not only media and political actors anymore who are able to shape the visibility of political topics, but citizens' social media activity can also exert remarkable influence on the public agenda (Blumler, 2016).

For these reasons, citizen engagement with political content online can shape the nature of public discourse during an election campaign, including the visibility of different political levels. However, the dynamics of these user preferences are still relatively uncovered in academic literature. We do not know, for example, to what extent people engage with European-level messages on social media platforms such as Facebook in the context of EP election campaigns, and how this is moderated by other content- and context-level factors such as associated topics, sentiment, party types, and country context.

To address these shortcomings, we test the second-order election and the related destructive visibility theses by investigating the direct and moderated effects of European-focused Facebook posts on user engagement that were published in the last 28 days of the 2019 EP election campaign. Alongside user-engagement data, we draw upon a hand-coded content analysis dataset including 9,688 posts of 68 parties from 12 EU countries. We find that, on the whole, user engagement with national-level political content prevails over the European-level, but users do not engage with EU-level posts more when they are presented in a context that can be harmful to the EU-project: There is no engagement gap between supportive and more skeptical countries, populist parties are not more effective with their EU-focused posts, and the negatively framed and divisive issue-focused EU-level content is not more popular either. Such findings raise the possibility that EU-level political posts can spread in the social media public in a less divisive way than previous research might suggest.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Second-Order Election and Destructive Visibility of European Politics

The central idea behind the theory of second-order elections is that in the electoral context of EP elections, the EU-level issues and discussions are considered less important than domestic concerns (Reif & Schmitt, 1980). This thesis has been investigated and confirmed from multiple perspectives: from political actors' rhetoric and communication (Haßler et al., 2020), to voters' issue perceptions (Clark, 2014) and media issue focus (de Vreese et al., 2006). Importance is, therefore, frequently connected to visibility: If EU-level issues are less prominent in political and media communication as well as in voters' perceptions compared to national-level politics, then the perceived importance of the EU-level remains secondary, a fact that can potentially weaken the frequently challenged democratic legitimacy of the EU (Follesdal & Hix, 2006).

In the last few years, however, many scholars have brought attention to the increasing politicization of European politics where numerous political conflicts are articulated on a European level (e.g., Braun & Grande, 2021). As a result, the public visibility of European politics has enhanced significantly over the last few years (Hutter & Grande, 2014). This heightened visibility, however, does not automatically result in a larger importance attributed to European compared to national politics. It is often argued that the current attention to European matters can be even harmful or destructive to the European integration project as it marks a shift from "permissive consensus" to "constraining dissensus" (Hooghe & Marks, 2009), and may promote the idea that the national level is or should be more important in solving policy challenges. For these reasons, when it comes to the second-order character of European politics, it is not only the level of visibility that matters, but also the nature of this visibility, i.e., the context in which European-level political issues are embedded when they are discussed in the public sphere. The context that can result in "harmful" or "destructive" visibility for the European level can be broken into macro-, meso-, and micro-dimensions.

On the macro-level, the differences across countries matter: Highly unequal visibility of EU-level issues across individual countries can be counter-productive. This is especially true when the visibility is strongly associated with general support toward the EU. If the visibility of European-level issues is significantly higher in countries which are already supportive of the EU, then this visibility gap may deepen the general EU-attitude gap across

these countries. Here, people in countries with a generally positive attitude toward integration will see more EU-level content, while in more Eurosceptic nations the dominance of the domestic level can reinforce the generally negative attitudes (cf. Hutter & Kriesi, 2019). Integration can only be enhanced by visibility which is relatively equally distributed across the member states.

On the meso-level, several studies demonstrated that the politicization of the EU-level is largely fueled by populist parties whose adversarial attitude can increase the visibility of the EU in a destructive way (e.g., Hutter & Grande, 2014). Populism is nowadays considered a major challenge for European integration (Van Kessel, 2015). However, while populist parties' approach to politics and policy ideas often contradicts the basic values of the EU (Norris & Inglehart, 2019), they effectively place the European level at the foreground of their communication.

On the micro-level, the immediate communication context can also produce destructive visibility for EU matters. The European political level can be addressed in varying ways. Its second-order character can be most effectively mitigated when policy topics are discussed at the EU-level or "through the EU" (Hertner, 2015, p. 471). However, the EU-level is often addressed through specific external events or topics bringing forward the role of the EU, but only on specific, transitional, often conflicting topics that could or should be solved by European institutions. Based on this differentiation, Senninger and Wagner (2015) distinguished between full and selective mobilization scenarios of party communication. Full mobilization occurs when parties discuss a wide array of policy topics on the EU-level, while selective mobilization refers to when parties selectively choose topics addressing the EU-level. While both strategies can increase the visibility of European politics, we argue that only the former can mitigate the second-order character of European politics. By contrast, selective mobilization limits the EU-level to some specific, externally driven, often temporary and instrumentalized topics, while keeping most policy issues on the national level. Another micro context-related concern is that parties (Eugster et al., 2020) and the media (Seddone et al., 2019) often frame EU-level politics in a negative way. When presented negatively, the larger visibility of EU-level politics cannot contribute to decreasing its second-order character as people will be more skeptical and dismissive of the EU (van Spanje & de Vreese, 2014).

In our research we will focus on both (a) the general visibility, and (b) the macro-, meso- and micro-context of the visibility of the European level that can result in a "destructive" visibility for European politics. However, on social media, visibility is not only a matter of politicians' and media communication but is also influenced by the degree to which users engage with content. Therefore, we test the second-order election hypothesis and the related "destructive visibility" thesis by investigating users' engagement with party posts.

2.2. User Engagement and the Visibility of European Politics

On social media, which have become one of the main political information resources for many voters (Newman et al., 2020), visibility largely depends on what kind of content users engage with due to the virality-based dissemination logic of these platforms (Klinger & Svensson, 2015) and the engagement-centric operation of content-filtering algorithms (Bucher, 2012). Here, highly reacted-to posts are more visible on social media sites as reactions can appear on friends' News Feeds, and posts with more reactions are more likely to be selected by the algorithm to be shown to users.

Beyond these direct effects on the public agenda, user engagement can also have an indirect effect on the visibility of political content. Provoking users' reactions with their posts is one of the main strategic goals of political actors' social media communication as this is a highly effective way to reach users beyond their followers cost-effectively (Kelm, 2020). Studies show that political actors intensively monitor user engagement patterns (McGregor, 2020) and make efforts to adjust their communication to users' preferences (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2021). Consequently, if users are seemingly more interested in national politics, parties are pushed to focus on the national level more intensively to gain reactions, while if users are more dedicated to European-level content, political actors are motivated to communicate about European-level issues. In addition, the context of EU-level communication can be also shaped by users' preferences if they engage with certain types of EU content more than with others. For these reasons, user engagement with party posts can have considerable influence on the second-order character of EP elections: Users can shape the public visibility of party messages directly and affect parties' communication indirectly.

However, while much recent research has examined media and political actors' approaches to EU-level politics, citizens' social media engagement is a rather unexplored area, especially when it comes to their engagement with political actors' posts. A few studies have examined user online activity in general as it relates to certain European issues (e.g., Bossetta et al., 2018; de Wilde et al., 2014), but to our knowledge, voter interaction with political actors' national- and EU-level content has been investigated by only two recent studies. First, drawing upon the same dataset used here, Haßler et al. (2020) examined issue ownership and second-order elections, finding no significant difference between the median values of shares provoked by national- and EU-focused posts across 12 European countries. However, their approach was descriptive, and no confounding factors or country- or party-level differences were considered. Therefore, their conclusion could not move beyond the fact that, in the total dataset, European-level posts are shared as frequently as domestic content. Second, Fazekas et al. (2021) employed

multivariate techniques to investigate the distinct effect of political level on user engagement. In their cross-country research they found that, during the 2014 EP election campaign, users were less likely to respond to EP candidates' EU-focused posts on Twitter, but the differences were modest, and the effect sizes were not uniform across countries.

In this article, we aim to move beyond previous work as our focus here is the unique and context-dependent effect of European-focused content on all general engagement types on Facebook. Therefore, we follow the research agenda of Fazekas et al. by conducting multivariate cross-country research on user engagement with political actors' EU- and national-level posts. Our focus, however, is on party Facebook pages rather than candidate Twitter pages. We investigate parties who are players in both the European and national political spheres in contrast with EP candidates investigated by Fazekas et al. (2021) whose sole focus was the European level. In the European context, Facebook is the most popular social media platform (Newman et al., 2020). Therefore, this is where users' political engagement can make a true difference in the public visibility of EU-level political information. However, Bossetta et al. (2017) argue that Facebook is a less appropriate space for transnational activity than Twitter due to, inter alia, its network structure. On Facebook, users are more embedded into their extended offline network than on Twitter which is a more interest-driven platform, and hence they are more motivated to publicly engage with political content that is locally relevant. These findings suggest that EU-level posts will be even less popular in this context than in those investigated by Fazekas et al. (2021). Further, findings about citizens' lower involvement in EU-level activities (Baglioni & Hurrelmann, 2016) suggest that on a platform that is more representative of the general population than Twitter (Bossetta et al., 2017), people will engage with European-level posts to a lesser degree. Hence, we hypothesize:

> H1: Users are less likely to engage with EU-level than with national-level posts on parties' Facebook pages.

If H1 is supported, then user engagement patterns will further increase the second-order character of EP elections. However, in line with our theoretical argument discussed above, we also assume that user engagement patterns are not uniform. It is important to uncover what context-related factors can make EU-level content more or less popular among users. This way we could test the "detrimental visibility" thesis, arguing that the EU-level is more likely to be engaged with by users when it is presented in a way that is harmful to the European integration process. Engagement with EU-level posts may be determined by whether countries are already highly supportive toward European integration or by the prominence of populist parties who challenge the basic values of the European Union. Further, engagement may also be triggered by the salience of specific topics or when messages are framed in a negative way. For these reasons we also investigate how macro- (country), meso- (party), and micro-level (message content) factors moderate the effects of EU-focused content on user engagement.

2.3. Macro-Level: Engagement Gap Across Countries

Even though EP election campaigns take place simultaneously in all member states, neither the national campaigns nor user engagement are cross-nationally uniform. For example, in countries more supportive towards the EU, parties might focus more strongly on the EU-level in their campaigns and users might engage more strongly with EU-level posts than in countries with rather skeptical attitudes towards the EU. This might lead to a cross-country visibility gap which can be detrimental to the integration process: It would lead to an even higher visibility of countries already supportive towards the EU, thus increasing the gap in perceived importance of the EU-level. However, research on the cross-country differences in user engagement pattern is scarce, and this is especially true when it comes to their engagement with EU-level content. The abovementioned study from Fazekas et al. (2021) found that countries differ from each other in terms of the popularity of EU-level content on candidates' Twitter pages, but this study is limited to four countries (Germany, Greece, Spain, UK). We extend this approach to the 12 countries involved in our sample. However, given the thin research base, we formulate an open research question focusing on the cross-country differences:

> RQ1: How far did engagement patterns with parties' posts on EU-level content differ cross-nationally in the 2019 EP election campaign?

The 12 countries we investigate differ with respect to several structural features. Table 1 in the Supplementary File shows the high level of variation between the countries in our sample and includes—besides variables related to EU support—a number of factors that might help interpret our results. However, motivated by the destructive visibility thesis, our main focus is if there is a visibility gap of the EU-level between supportive and more Eurosceptical countries.

2.4. Meso-Level: The Populist Threat

Alongside such potential macro influences on user engagement with European-focused campaign posts, research also demonstrated differences across parties (Adam & Maier, 2016). We therefore expect that certain parties are more effective in provoking user engagement with their EU-level content than others, which affects the way general social media users are exposed to European politics on these platforms. In line with H1 we expect that the EU-level will be less popular than the national level for each party type, but we also assume that the gap between

the popularity of the two levels can be narrower in the case of populist parties compared to non-populist parties.

Reinemann et al. (2016) identified three distinct forms of populist appeals: empty populism, anti-elitism, and exclusionary populism. Empty populism means political actors addressing "the people" as representatives of the disempowered masses. Anti-elite and exclusionary populism blame the elites or out-groups for current problems. Populist appeals can be effectively connected to the EU-level which may make populist parties' EU-level communication particularly popular among users: The bureaucratic setup of EU-level decision-making can be easily criticized from an anti-elite perspective, while its democratic deficit can be effectively contrasted with the people-centric perspective. As the immigration crisis was also addressed by European institutions, anti-immigration rhetoric fits also well into EU-level communication. Therefore, we hypothesize:

> H2: The gap between the engagement levels of EU- and national-focused posts is smaller for populists than non-populist parties.

2.5. Micro-Level: Selective and Negative Mobilization

Previous work showed that the second-order character is conditioned by content-related factors. European-level content can be presented in different ways, and it is possible that it is more popular among users in certain forms than others. Two recurring concerns are investigated here: the selective mobilization thesis, and the negative framing of European politics. Our basic assumption is the same as for the effect of populist parties: Based on H1, we presume that the EU-level will be less engaged with irrespective of the associated content elements (main effect), but the gap between the two levels can be more moderate for some content types than for others (interaction effect).

When it comes to the selective mobilization thesis discussed above, the role of specific issues should be considered. Although the issue focus of party EU-level political communication has been previously investigated (e.g., Senninger & Wagner, 2015), we do not know if users are selectively engaging with topics addressed on the EU-level. During the 2019 EP election campaign, there were two policy issues salient in almost every EU member state (European Commission, 2019) that both heavily impact national politics in member states and have an important EU-level policy dimension: environmental policy/climate change and immigration policy. Both issues are at the center of political conflicts that can be observed across Europe and often relate to the EU-level, while also being contested across parties. Party campaigns are, however, at the same time focused on traditional policy issues such as economy and social/labor policy—topics that are almost always salient in political campaigns and have strong European dimensions as well (Green-Pedersen & Walgrave, 2014). If the selective mobilization thesis is valid for user engagement, we can expect that an EU-focus on the salient issues of environmental and immigration policy will be more rewarded by users than other prominent policy issues such as economy and social/labor policy.

> H3: The gap between the engagement levels of EU- and national-focused posts is smaller when they are associated with environmental policy (H3a) or immigration policy (H3b).

> H4: The gap between the engagement levels of EU- and national-focused posts is larger when they are associated with economy (H4a) or labor/social policy (H4b).

Regarding the negative visibility thesis, when it comes to user engagement in particular, negativity has a strong potential to make content more visible. Previous research demonstrates that voters pay closer attention to negative content in political campaigns (Meffert et al., 2006). Consistent with this, studies show that specifically on Facebook, users are more likely to engage with negative than with positive or neutral posts (e.g., Bene et al., 2021). While negativity is a productive strategy to trigger engagement in general, there are arguments that this may be especially popular when articulated on the EU-level: Even though European citizens' confidence in the EU and its institutions has increased over the last years, it is still rather low. In 2019, for example, only 43% of Europeans tended to trust the EU and its institutions (European Commission, 2019). As argued above, the EU is an easy target to blame and make responsible for people's dissatisfaction and distrust in politics. Due to the impersonal, bureaucratic nature of its institutions, it cannot effectively defend itself from political attacks. Given the overall high level of dissatisfaction with and distrust towards the EU, we hypothesize:

> H5: The gap between the engagement levels of EU- and national-focused posts is smaller when they are framed in a negative way.

3. Methods

To answer our research question and test the hypotheses, we conducted a standardized content analysis of posts on official party Facebook pages during the EP election campaign of 2019. The data were collected in our collaborative research project "Campaigning for Strasbourg" (CamforS; see https://digidemo.ifkw.lmu.de/camfors). We coded 9,688 posts from 12 countries (Austria, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Poland, Romania, Spain, Sweden, and the UK) deriving from the pages of parties that reached more than 5% of the votes during the EP election. The sampling period covers the 28 days before the election including the election day (26/05/2019, with the exception of the

UK where it was 23/05/2019). Based on coding capacities and sample sizes, in some countries we coded the full sample, while in others a random sample was drawn from the posts (see Table 1 in the Supplementary File for sample sizes). The Facebook posts were collected using Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2019) and CrowdTangle (for Romania and Denmark; CrowdTangle, 2021). To ensure the reliability of the empirical instrument, all collaboration partners jointly developed the coding scheme. The Facebook posts from the 12 countries were coded by 1–5 coders in the individual country teams. To test for reliability, a random sample of 48 posts from the Facebook pages of European parties was coded by all coders. The reliability of the categories used proved to be good (all Holsti above .70).

Dependent variables: User engagement is analyzed by means of three indicators: (a) the reactions to posts, defined as the sum of Facebook "likes" and "reactions" (e.g., "love," "wow"); (b) the number of "comments;" and (c) the number of "shares."

Independent variables: All categories on the content level of posts were coded as binary variables indicating whether a content characteristic was absent ("0") or present ("1") in its text, pictures, or videos. To analyze the impact of the addressed "political level" within a post, we differentiated whether a post referred to five different levels ("global," "EU," "national," "local," or "other level," where this last one is a residual category including, e.g., bilateral relations beyond the previously mentioned levels). In our models, we focus only on the EU-level with the national level as a reference category by controlling local, global, and other levels. Topics of posts were measured by categories capturing if certain policy issues were addressed in a post. Here, we focus on the topics of "immigration policy," "environmental/energy policy," "economy/finance," and "labour/social issues." "Negativity" of a post was coded when the post contained any negative statements. Parties were differentiated according to their status as being a populist party or not, based on the categorization of The PopuList (Rooduijn et al., 2019).

Control variables: To account for different post features that could influence user engagement but are beyond our focus of interest, we included a variety of control variables to our analyses: We controlled for the presence/absence of images/videos in a post, the number of words, the inclusion of hyperlinks, the day a post was published, the number of followers of a Facebook page, and the number of posts published on that page. Additionally, we controlled for the electoral support of parties included in the analyses (for descriptives see Table 2 in the Supplementary File).

4. Findings

4.1. Country Differences (Macro-Level)

To investigate cross-country differences, we calculated correlation coefficients between the focus of the posts (both on EU- and national-level) and user engagement metrics. However, we used a standardized version of these metrics rather than their raw values to control for the differences in the level of user activity across party pages.

The last two columns of Table 1 show that the degree to which posts addressed the EU- and national-level differs cross-nationally. However, this seems to be less strongly related to attitudes towards the EU. In Denmark, Ireland, Poland, Italy, and the UK, parties focused particularly strongly on the national level in their Facebook posts. People in Denmark, Poland, and Ireland are generally supportive toward the EU, but Italy and the UK are among the more Eurosceptic countries (Table 1 in the Supplementary File). Situational factors may be important here: All these countries held national elections in close temporal connection with the EP election, with the UK campaign conducted in the shadow of Brexit. Austria, Spain, and Hungary—which apart from Hungary also held national elections—displayed a moderate focus on the national level. In the other countries which did not hold national elections, we see an equal share of EU- and national-level posts (Romania) or the campaign focused on the EU-level (France, Germany, Sweden). Based on these observations, it seems that the second-order character of the EP elections in parties' communication is at least partly conditioned by the closeness of national elections.

Turning to user engagement patterns, our findings show that users engage with posts addressing the EU-level to a different degree in different countries. In France, Ireland, and Romania, user engagement does not significantly differ depending on the levels addressed. In Italy, Spain, Austria (for reactions and comments), and Hungary (for reactions and shares), users are significantly more engaged with the national than with the EU-level; again, countries (with the exception of Hungary) that held other elections in close proximity to the EP election. Although differences in the correlation coefficients are not significant, they are rather substantial in the case of Germany (only for shares) and Sweden (only for reactions) where national-level posts seem to be much more popular, and in Denmark (for reactions and shares), Poland (for comments and shares), and the UK (only for reactions) where the EU-level attracted more user engagement. Thus, we see an overall mixed pattern: On the one hand, countries with more similar user engagement patterns are rather heterogeneous both geographically, politically, and in their EU-related factors. On the other hand, situational factors in terms of close domestic elections do not explain these patterns either. Moreover, how strongly the parties focus on the EU- vs. national-level in their Facebook posts does not seem to uniformly affect user engagement patterns across countries. A more remarkable congruence between party communication and user engagement patterns can be seen in Austria, Hungary, Italy, Spain, and Romania, but strongly divergent patterns are

Table 1. Pearson's correlation between a posts' political level and their user engagement metrics in standardized form by countries.

	Reactions		Comments		Shares		% of Posts	
	EU	national	EU	national	EU	national	EU	national
Austria	**–.14*** **	**.09***	**–.12****	**.11****	–.06	.06	45%	60%
Denmark	.01	–.14*	–.05	.05	–.03	–.16*	19%	93%
France	–.01	–.00	.00	–.00	.03	–.00	58%	46%
Germany	–.05	.00	–.03	.01	–.11*	.07	69%	27%
Hungary	**–.11****	**.10***	–.04	.04	**–.13*****	**.11****	39%	61%
Ireland	–.09	–.07	–.08	–.01	–.01	.01	25%	88%
Italy	**–.06****	.04	**–.08*****	**.09*****	**–.05***	**.06***	32%	69%
Poland	.17	.17*	.12	–.12	.35***	.12	9%	77%
Romania	.00	–.03	–.02	.01	–.01	.05	57%	59%
Spain	–.**16*****	.**30*****	**–.10****	**.19*****	**–.12*****	**.19*****	17%	40%
Sweden	–.09	.08	–.01	–.02	.02	.04	72%	16%
UK	.09	–.14*	.00	–.09	.05	–.07	19%	66%

Notes: Standardized user engagement metrics are the deviations from the mean number of reactions, comments and shares of the specific parties expressed in standard deviation. *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. Significant differences between correlation coefficients (based on their confidence intervals) are highlighted in bold. The variables EU-level and national-level are not mutually exclusive, therefore one post can belong to both or none of these categories.

evident in Denmark, Poland, the UK, Sweden, Germany, and Ireland. Overall, it seems that while there are substantial cross-country differences, these do not result in a visibility gap between supportive and Eurosceptic countries as the variances are not related to EU support (Table 1 in the Supplementary File).

4.2. Direct and Indirect Effects on User Engagement With EU-Level Content (Meso- and Micro-Level)

To test the effects of party- and content-level factors, we conducted multilevel negative binomial regression models with random intercept on the level of parties and country fixed effects. As local, global, and other levels are added as control variables, the reference category of the independent variable of "EU-level" is national-level; thus, EU and national levels are directly contrasted (Table 2; see the Supplementary File for the formal model expression).

As for the direct effect, it seems that people are generally less willing to react to and comment on posts focusing on the EU-level. These negative effects remain significant even when interaction terms are added. The only exception is sharing, where no significant relationship was detected when the interaction effects are entered. So, while European-focused posts are significantly less reacted-to and commented-on in line with the second-order hypothesis, their sharing potential is no worse than that of national-level posts when the interaction effects are controlled for. Therefore, H1 is supported in the case of reactions and comments but rejected for sharing: The reaction- and comment-fueled visibility of European-level content may be mitigated by user preferences, but the non-significant effect of sharing indicates that, in the viral chains of sharing, European-focused content is as much present as domestic political content.

However, it is important to see what European-focused content is most engaged with. It seems that populist parties—whose anti-elite rhetoric is frequently directed to the EU-level—gain less reactions, comments, and shares when focusing on the EU-level than mainstream parties (Figure 1). Interestingly, an EU-level focus has a stronger disengaging effect on the followers of populist parties than on those of mainstream parties, rejecting our H2. Populist parties whose European-level communication is frequently considered as destructive cannot reach their followers effectively with these messages, therefore the visibility of European content is more fueled by mainstream political actors.

Turning to the content-level moderators, the effects of EU-level content on user engagement seem to be rather uniform across different topics. The engagement gap between national and EU-level is practically the same for environment, economy, labor, and social policy-focused posts in each dimension. The only exception to this finding is immigration-focused posts in the case of reactions and comments (marginally significant; Figure 1). However, the direction of the interaction effect is the opposite of what we expected: Focusing on the EU-level in immigration-related posts decreases the number of reactions and comments more heavily than in the case of non-immigration posts. It seems therefore that the social media popularity of the immigration topic could be seriously undermined when it is discussed at the EU-level. In summary, we cannot find any major topic where EU-focus is more popular than suggested by the

Table 2. Random-intercept negative binomial regression estimates for reactions, comments, and shares on parties' posts.

	Reaction (model 1)	Reaction (model 2)	Comment (model 1)	Comment (model 2)	Share (model 1)	Share (model 2)
European level	–**.19** (.02)***	–**.11** (.04)**	–**.35** (.03)***	–**.24** (.05)***	–**.16** (.03)***	.01 (.05)
immigration	**.20** (.05)***	**.29** (.06)***	.09 (.07)	**.19** (.09)*	**.30** (.06)***	**.35** (.08)***
environment	–**.26** (.04)***	–**.20** (.06)***	–**.36** (.06)***	–**.35** (.08)***	–**.28** (.06)***	–**.38** (.07)***
economy	–**.10** (.04)**	–**.13** (.05)**	–**.23** (.05)***	–**.24** (.06)***	–.08 (.04)#	–.02 (.06)
labor & social policy	–**.06** (.03)*	–.04 (.04)	–**.23** (.04)***	–**.23** (.05)***	**.12** (.04)**	**.13** (.05)**
negativity	**.24** (.03)***	**.25** (.03)***	**.49** (.04)***	**.52** (.04)***	**.58** (.03)***	**.67** (.04)***
populist party	**.87** (.15)***	**.91** (.15)***	**.62** (.20)**	**.68** (.20)***	**.97** (.16)***	**1.05** (.16)***
EU + immigration		–**.21** (.09)*		–.25 (.13)#		–.14 (.12)
EU + environment		–.10 (.08)		–.03 (.11)		.19 (.10)#
EU + economy		.10 (.07)		.04 (.10)		–.12 (.09)
EU + labor & social policy		–.08 (.06)		.00 (.09)		–.04 (.08)
EU + negativity		–.02 (.05)		–.09 (.07)		–**.29** (.07)***
EU + populist party		–**.11** (.05)*		–**.17** (.07)*		–**.20** (.06)**
local level	–**.19** (.03)***	–**.18** (.03)***	–**.17** (.04)***	–**.18** (.04)***	–**.43** (.04)***	–**.44** (.04)***
global level	–**.18** (.08)*	–**.18** (.08)*	–**.22** (.11)*	–**.23** (.11)*	–.16 (.10)	–.14 (.10)
other level	–.05 (.12)	–.04 (.12)	–.20 (.17)	–.20 (.17)	.18 (.16)	.18 (.15)
image	**.35** (.07)***	**.35** (.07)***	.14 (.09)	.13 (.09)	**.34** (09)***	**.34** (09)***
video	.01 (.07)	.01 (.07)	**.50** (.10)***	**.49** (.10)***	**.59** (.09)***	**.59** (.09)***
wordcount	**.00** (.00)**	**.00** (.00)**	–.00 (.00)	–.00 (.00)	**.00** (.00)***	**.00** (.00)***
link	–**.27** (.03)***	–**.27** (.03)***	–.05 (.04)	–.06 (.04)	**.09** (.04)*	.08 (.04)#
day	**.00** (.00)*	**.00** (.00)*	**.00** (.00)**	**.00** (.00)**	–.00 (.00)	–.00 (.00)
num_followers	**.00** (.00)**	**.00** (.00)**	**.00** (.00)***	**.00** (.00)***	**.00** (.00)***	**.00** (.00)***
num_posts	–**.00** (.00)*	–**.00** (.00)*	**–.00** (.00)*	–**.00** (.00)*	–**.00** (.00)***	–**.00** (.00)***
electoral support	**.01** (.01)*	**.01** (.01)*	**.03** (.01)***	**.03** (.01)***	**.02** (.01)*	**.02** (.01)*
constant	5.03 (.25)***	4.99 (.25)***	2.57 (.34)***	2.54 (.34)***	2.44 (.27)***	2.36 (.27)***
variance of random intercept	.21 (.45)	.21 (.46)	.37 (.61)	.37 (.61)	.22 (.47)	.23 (.48)
Log-likelihood	–49933.8	–49926.1	–35448.6	–35441.1	–39950	–39926
disp. parameter	1.31	1.31	0.73	0.73	0.83	0.84
AIC	99931.6	99928.2	70961.2	70958.2	79964	79928
N Level 1/Level 2	7012/67	7012/67	7000/67	7000/67	7017/67	7017/67

Notes: Standard errors are in parentheses. #p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001. Party fixed effects are included in the models, but not presented in the table. Significant differences between correlation coefficients (based on their confidence intervals) are highlighted in bold.

direct effect, and immigration is definitely not the issue where EU-level focus can gain larger acceptance by the audience, but environment is not an attractive supranational topic either. On the other hand, as no topic was detrimental to EU-focus, our findings suggest that users are not selectively mobilized in EU-related matters (H3 and H4 rejected). The engagement with EU-level content is not topic-specific, and most importantly, not driven by conflicting, often transitional hot topics which would result in destructive visibility of European politics.

Our last hypothesis—exploring the micro-level—concerned negativity. After shifting the negative content of the posts to the EU-level, the results turned out to be contrary to our initial assumptions and revealed that there are no significant differences in user engagement for negative posts in terms of reactions and comments (Figure 1). In fact, the moderating effect of negativity on user interactivity is only significant for shares, albeit in the opposite direction to what we expected. Negative posts are shared much less frequently when addressing

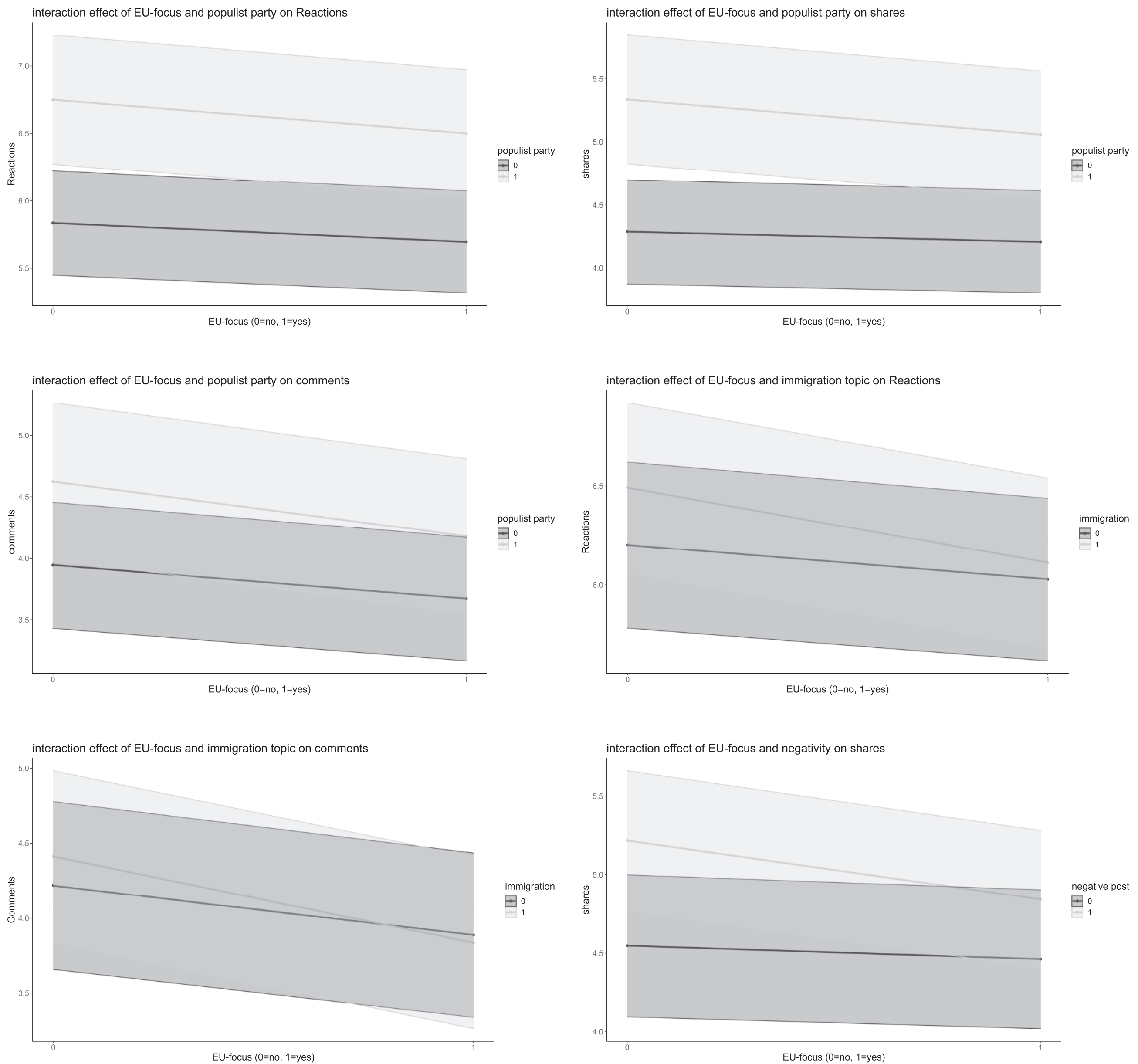

Figure 1. Significant interaction effects.

the EU-level than when addressing the national level. It seems that in the case of negative posts, addressing the EU-level has a stronger deterrent effect on sharing than in the case of non-negative posts (H5 rejected). It can be concluded that negativity does not appear to be a driver of increased social media user engagement at the EU-level, therefore negative framing of European politics is not motivated by users' preferences.

5. Conclusion

Our research focused on one dimension of citizen engagement with European politics, namely engagement via Facebook as a response to the campaigns of political parties across 12 member states during the 2019 EP election. While across the nations we find a mixed agenda, incorporating national and European politics, largely those Facebook users who engage with parties' posts seem more likely to react to or comment on posts that focus on national issues. Reinforcing the findings of Fazekas et al. (2021), we find those who engaged with political party posts were significantly less likely to make any reaction or comment to posts that focused on policy at the EU-level. Hence these engagement patterns may drive the character of EP elections towards a greater ethnocentric focus as parties strive to post content which is attractive to their followers and the wider community (Ennser-Jedenastik et al., 2021). On this basis, EU-level politics may become increasingly invisible during future contests, reinforcing its second-order character. If EU politics is less visible, it may never be seen as salient, and citizens will be unlikely to develop any understand-

ing of the relevance of the EP and the EU beyond times of crisis when media does offer it some attention. This scenario could only exacerbate disconnections between European citizens and the institutions of the EU, thus deepening the EU's supposed democratic deficit.

However, our data does not offer a wholly negative picture. First, there are remarkable differences across countries, and there is a rather heterogeneous set of countries where EU-focused posts are no less popular than national posts. Second, if party posts do not focus on any of the topics investigated here, and do not contain negative sentiments, they are as likely to be shared as similar posts focusing on national-level politics. As sharing is important for a post being visible to a broader range of the users of a social media platform, we may suggest that more posts of this nature can elevate the relevance of the EU. Third, concerns regarding the more divisive, selective, and negative presence of EU-level politics can also be rejected. There is no engagement gap between supportive and more Eurosceptic countries, populist parties are not more successful with their EU-focused content, and people do not selectively engage with European content based on its topics or negative valence. In fact, posts on immigration or with negative valence or content which are produced by the populist parties are often less likely to be engaged with by users when focusing on EU-level. Therefore, while there is an engagement gap, and EU politics gains less engagement, at least the engagement is not received for posts that would exacerbate extant levels of mistrust and Euroscepticism.

We therefore speculate that, actually, European politics can spread within social media platforms in a less divisive and negative way than we expected. Research has found that posts which express negative sentiments by focusing on controversial issues such as immigration, and by adopting a populist tone, receive greater engagement among users (Bene et al., 2021). However, we find that higher engagement is mostly awarded to these posts when the focus is on domestic politics and not the EU-level. While this can be divisive within a nation, it may not have the deleterious effect on trust in the EU that we might expect. This speculative argument is however based purely on engagement with the posts of political parties on one platform. It may be that other platforms see differing patterns of engagement which run counter to our findings. Also, this research covered only national parties which are crucial actors of European politics, but individual politicians also matter. Future studies should uncover if the patterns identified here are different for the pages of political leaders or European politicians.

Nonetheless, our research can be seen as an important step toward understanding the role user engagement may play in the second-order character of EU politics. Our findings suggest that pro-European actors need to make serious efforts to bring the EU closer to the people, but the silver lining is content of a divisive nature appears unattractive for social media users.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Exploring Engagement With EU News on Facebook: The Influence of Content Characteristics

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Abstract
The EU is diagnosed with a participation deficit, rooted in a lack of public communication. While news media are the primary source of information about EU politics, social media have become an important channel for political information. Importantly, social media platforms offer unique opportunities for citizens to engage with information about the EU. Such engagement is under-researched despite users' responses offering valuable information about the potential effects of EU news on public engagement. Therefore, we systematically analyze social media users' engagement with news about the EU. Drawing on the concepts of news values and shareworthiness, we investigate the *proximity*, *conflictuality*, *negativity*, and *emotionality* of EU news content posted on mainstream media Facebook accounts to explain the variation in reactions, shares, and number of comments. Using semi-supervised machine learning, we analyze articles from the largest newspapers in Austria for the period 2015–2019, along with Facebook users' reactions to them. Results resonate only partly with prior literature, with *negativity* of EU news leading to more reactions and shares but fewer comments; *emotionality*, to fewer reactions and shares but more comments; and *conflict* mainly decreasing user engagement. Concerning *proximity*, a national angle leads to distinctly more engagement, whereas news about other EU member states and the EU as such do mostly not. Our study contributes to the discussion on how citizens engage with information on the EU and how to promote informed debate on social media through elites' communication.

Keywords
automated content analysis; computational methods; European Union; Facebook; news; social media; user engagement

Issue
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1. Introduction

The EU has been diagnosed with a participation deficit, characterized by the public's general lack of interest in EU affairs, rooted in its low visibility in public discourse and the media, as well as the alleged remoteness and lack of transparency of the EU's political structures (Boomgaarden et al., 2013; Michailidou, 2008). In over a decade of crises, people's interest in EU politics has increased, and so has the EU's media visibility, both however negatively: Public support for the EU has declined in many member states (Baglioni & Hurrelmann, 2016), empowering Euroskeptic, even nationalist political forces (e.g., Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). Media coverage has remained highly negative and skeptical (Marquart et al., 2018). Therefore, EU crises have increased political interest in EU affairs (de Wilde et al., 2014), but in the form of Euroskepticism, thus not with more, but rather with less support for European integration. This may seem bad news for the EU in terms of its

legitimacy. Yet, considering, for example, the notoriously low turnout in EU elections (e.g., Gattermann et al., 2021), more interest in and engagement with EU politics should generally be seen as desirable; after all, democracy lives on the regular feedback from and engagement with its citizens (e.g., Van Deth, 2016).

Regarding possible modes and channels for participation, the past decade has witnessed dramatic changes in how people consume political information and engage with politics owing to the advent of the internet (e.g., Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). Social media not only allow the diffusion of information from the political elite (top-down) but also from citizens (bottom-up) and were, therefore, welcomed as a promising new route to fostering participation in the EU's democratic process (Michailidou, 2008). Indeed, citizens' attention has increasingly shifted toward social media as a disseminator of political information and the main entry point for news consumption (Bode, 2016; Newman et al., 2021; Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019). The academic debate about the EU's democratic deficit, however, does not mirror the increased importance of social media as they remain an under-researched arena of public discourse about and engagement with European politics (but see the works by Michailidou and others for notable exceptions, e.g., Barisione & Michailidou, 2017). Existing studies (e.g., Bossetta et al., 2017; Fazekas et al., 2021; Galpin & Trenz, 2019) have provided important insight into citizens' social media engagement in EU politics but have often remained focused on special events such as the EU elections. As a result, we only have limited knowledge about the general dynamics of public engagement with social media content about the EU.

In this study, we investigate users' engagement with news media content about EU politics in particular. As we know from earlier studies, the daily news is often the only source of information about EU politics (e.g., Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2016; Boomgaarden et al., 2013; Marquart et al., 2018). By focusing on engagement with social media content produced by professional journalists, we connect the top-down and bottom-up dimensions of public communication about the EU, allowing us to dovetail earlier research. In addition, it remains challenging to trace the actual reception and potential effects of top-down information like news media content on the public, particularly in a multilevel polity like the EU and an increasingly complex media environment (e.g., Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016). Given the centrality of social media as a source of political information (e.g., Welbers & Opgenhaffen, 2019), user engagement with EU news posted on social media platforms could therefore help to better understand its potential impact on the public awareness and opinion.

We contribute to the literature by providing a comprehensive, large-scale analysis of users' engagement with EU news on Facebook. Our analysis is theoretically embedded in the discussion on news values (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017) and shareworthiness (Trilling et al., 2017). We look into the characteristics of EU news content posted on mainstream media accounts for the period 2015–2019 to explain the variation in the number of reactions, shares, and comments a post received. Relying on semi-supervised machine learning, we analyze articles from the 12 largest newspapers in Austria posted on their Facebook accounts along with users' reactions to them. By focusing on a rather small EU member state such as Austria, we were able to conduct a comprehensive analysis including all important newspapers on the country's most popular social media site. Overall, our study contributes to the discussion on how citizens engage with EU politics and promote informed debates on social media through elites' communication.

2. Engaging With EU News Content on Social Media

Democracy thrives on the active participation of its citizens, broadly defined as "citizens' activities affecting politics" (Van Deth, 2016, p. 2). The internet has brought about new opportunities for participation: Aside from the more direct forms, such as signing petitions or campaign donations, citizens' active engagement with political news, e.g., writing letters to the editor, but also reacting to or sharing news articles online, has been conceptualized as political engagement (e.g., Vissers & Stolle, 2014). Thus, political participation also accommodates the new possibilities brought about by the broader process of digitalization. Regarding citizens' engagement, the democratic credentials of the EU have long been contested, resulting in a diagnosis of a participation deficit: This is mirrored in, for example, the notoriously low turnout in elections to the European Parliament, which is only slowly beginning to resemble elections where something is at stake (Gattermann et al., 2021). Therefore, digital communication channels were welcomed as promising ways to promote citizens' engagement in EU politics (Michailidou, 2008).

Yet, research on social media communication is often ambivalent regarding possible effects on democracy and public discourse. On the positive side, the possibility of direct, unedited communication on social media offers space for peoples' ungated participation in public discussions. It thus is "a valuable contribution that adds to the plurality of public opinion formation in the democratic public sphere" (Cinalli et al., 2021, p. 87). On the negative side, however, user comments have often been described as furthering hate speech, being uncivil or at least very negative (e.g., Ekman, 2019; Galpin & Trenz, 2019), and in that sense destabilizing, rather than enriching public discourse (Cinalli et al., 2021, p. 86). Regarding the EU, social media is indeed considered a promising tool for furthering engagement with the potential to eliminate the borders which still structure the public sphere in the EU (Bossetta et al., 2017). However, social media users' comments on EU news have also been described as overwhelmingly negative and even populist (Galpin & Trenz, 2019).

While research regarding EU engagement on social media has often remained focused on the content of social media interactions about EU issues, our study investigates different nuances, guided by the overall question of what characteristics of EU news coverage trigger different forms of online engagement. We distinguish reactions, sharing, and commenting: While the sharing of and commenting on information on social media might be seen as forms of engagement requiring most user commitment compared to reactions (e.g., "like"), the latter are distinctly more common (Larsson, 2018). All interactions increase a content's reach and fostering interaction might be seen as the main objective of elite actors on the platforms (e.g., Kelm, 2020). There are, however, qualitative differences. Reactions, especially the fine-grained range of "emotions" provided by Facebook to respond to content, are often ambivalent, making them hard to interpret (e.g., Eberl et al., 2020). Moreover, it is not certain that the reacting users are aware that their actions increase the content's reach. On the other hand, sharing is a deliberate act of forwarding information to people in one's network. Commenting implies the most commitment from users, as they not only react or share but actively express their opinion towards a topic in public space (e.g., Salgado & Bobba, 2019). Overall, however, it is important to note that social media engagement is an indication of involvement and participation, which does not allow us to derive any conclusions about the underlying notions of users regarding the legitimacy of the EU as such.

A growing body of literature assesses what news content characteristics trigger user engagement on social media. Derived from news values theory (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017), news characteristics and social media users' responses are commonly discussed in terms of shareworthiness (e.g., Trilling et al., 2017). To this end, studies provide evidence that news values play a role in user engagement with news content on social media platforms (Kilgo et al., 2020; Trilling et al., 2017). Regarding EU news, social media user engagement has been subject to limited empirical research but suggests that users react to how an issue is framed in EU news texts (Galpin & Trenz, 2019). However, little is known about what EU news characteristics trigger other forms of engagement.

Based on these considerations, we now turn to sketch hypotheses to guide our analyses. Given the scarcity of research on the topic, we draw on analyses of EU media coverage, as well as the general literature on news values and shareworthiness as to how characteristics of news content may influence user engagement on social media. We focus on four major aspects shown to be important to EU news (Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2016; Boomgaarden et al., 2013; Marquart et al., 2018) or news values and shareworthiness in general (Galtung & Ruge, 1965, García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Salgado & Bobba, 2019; Shoemaker, 1996; Trilling et al., 2017; Ziegele et al., 2014; Ziegele & Quiring, 2013). Information that is easily brought to one's mind is more likely to be shared; indeed, the *proximity* aspect is a crucial predictor of news—and shareworthiness, including in research concerned with the EU in particular (Boomgaarden et al., 2013; García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Trilling et al., 2017). Rooted in evolutionary psychology, the news values of *conflict* and *negativity* have repeatedly been found central to news values and indicators of shareworthiness (García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017; Karnowski et al., 2021), including in studies of EU news (Boomgaarden et al., 2013; Gattermann, 2013). Finally, the *emotionality* of news content is often studied in analyses of shareworthiness (García-Perdomo et al., 2018) and represents an important news value (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). To our best knowledge, it has not received attention in EU studies. Our research, thus, extends the debate by including it in the analysis.

Proximity. The EU is still perceived as rather remote, complex, and fundamentally different from the nation-state in how political decision-making is organized. The national system, in contrast, is often used as a proxy to explain the complicated legislative processes at the EU level (Gattermann, 2013). Domestification or geographical proximity is generally among the factors making news more newsworthy (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017) and more shareworthy on social media (García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Trilling et al., 2017). A strong domestic angle is also a persistent pattern in EU news coverage (e.g., Boomgaarden et al., 2013; Eisele, 2017). Moreover, news about other EU member states (horizontal Europeanization) rather than about the EU and its institutions (vertical Europeanization) are expected to induce more engagement (see Koopmans & Erbe, 2004 for an elaboration on Europeanization). Larger member states, neighboring countries, or other EU countries with cultural ties or a shared language may stand out as being more relevant to the readership (e.g., Gattermann, 2013; Walter, 2016). In terms of relevance and anticipated engagement, thus, we can distinguish degrees of geographical or political proximity, with EU news being most distant when they are about the EU as such, less distant when they are about other EU member states, bordering countries, and closest when they deal with Austrian EU politics. Against this background, we expect that:

> H1: The greater the proximity of EU news, the more it prompts engagement by social media users.

Conflict. Conflict has repeatedly been found to be a strong news value (e.g., Schultz, 2007). Regarding the EU as a news topic, the conflicts resulting from policy responses to EU crises, mirrored in a surge of Euroskepticism in party systems, the media, and public opinion (Boomgaarden & De Vreese, 2016; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016; Marquart et al., 2018), have increased the EU's presence on the media agenda (e.g., Boomgaarden et al., 2013). Also, in analyses of

social media user engagement, conflict has been identified as a prominent characteristic of shared stories (García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Accordingly, we expect that:

> H2: The more prominently conflict is discussed in EU news, the more it prompts engagement by social media users.

Negativity. The negativity of news is an important news value (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). EU news, in particular, is found to have increased, but negatively so (Marquart et al., 2018). As with conflict, this increase in negativity is mostly attributed to a decade of crises during which issues such as austerity policies and increasing unemployment rates, as well as an unprecedented number of refugees, increased public criticism. Moreover, negativity is also a strong predictor of user engagement on social media (García-Perdomo et al., 2018; Salgado & Bobba, 2019; Trilling et al., 2017). Against this backdrop, we expect that:

> H3: The more negatively EU news is discussed, the more it prompts engagement by social media users.

Emotionality. Often shared news items on social media have been described as "stuff that makes you laugh and stuff that makes you angry" (Gibson quoted in Newman, 2011, p. 24), highlighting the importance of emotional appeals for the shareworthiness of news (Berger & Milkman, 2012; Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). Accordingly, studies find that emotional content is engaged with on social media to a greater extent (Berger, 2011; Salgado & Bobba, 2019). We thus expect that:

> H4: The more emotionally EU news is discussed, the more it prompts engagement by social media users.

3. Methodology

3.1. Case Selection

Politically, Austria is an interesting case regarding the dynamics between the national and the EU level. Especially the migration crisis of 2015/2016 shook the political system, causing deep conflicts (Auel & Pollak, 2016). Moreover, the rather small news market allows for a comprehensive analysis of (almost) all-important news outlets. Despite being a small country, Austrian newspapers dominate the print segment, with almost no "imported" newspapers from other German-speaking markets (e.g., Newman et al., 2021).

Shareworthiness on Facebook is a major factor for newsmakers to consider, and accordingly, Facebook is driving most traffic in online news (Harcup & O'Neill, 2017). In Austria, Facebook is the most popular social media site, used by around 31% for news consumption and 60% overall (Newman et al., 2021), this being why we decided to analyze Facebook rather than, for example, Twitter: The Austrian Twittersphere is described as rather elitist, populated by journalists and politicians and only used by 5% of Austrians for news consumption (e.g., Maares et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2021).

3.2. Data Collection

We analyzed EU news, operationalized as news content about the EU and its institutions, actors, and key policies. We collected news articles published between 2015 and 2019 in 12 Austrian newspapers as well as the status posts from their official Facebook accounts. We queried the API of the Austrian Press Agency to retrieve the news articles (see Table 1). All outlets were selected based on their reach, journalistic routines, and scope of distribution, presenting a good cross-section of the Austrian press. We then compiled a search string to identify articles that deal with the EU (Please see Section A1 in the Supplementary Material for the complete search string used to retrieve articles). The search string was created relying on existing studies, the expert knowledge of the authors, and terms stemming from the manual inspection of a random sample of 875 articles. Using a fresh random sample of 1,500 news articles, the search string was validated by three independent manual coders (Krippendorff's α = 0.86), reaching satisfactory performance scores (precision = 0.92, recall = 0.96, F1 = 0.94). A python script was used to collect the data, gathering the textual content and metadata of N = 258,704 EU-related news articles.

Similarly, we collected all status posts published by the Facebook accounts of the news outlets via CrowdTangle (see Table 1). Gathering textual content (i.e., captions), associated metadata (e.g., date, URL), and user interaction information (number of reactions, shares, and comments), we collected a total of N = 570,700 status posts.

3.3. Content Matching/Tracing

As Facebook does not provide any information beyond a "caption" (comparable to the article's headline) of the external resource (e.g., a news article), both data sources needed to be connected to enable the linkage of Facebook user engagement and news content. Thus, we compared captions used by news outlets to advertise articles on Facebook with the headlines of the items in the news media data. While some outlets use identical texts for both, others alter (e.g., shorten) it slightly on the social media platform. We used cosine similarity to account for marginal differences. We manually inspected matched texts by comparing different thresholds considering the number of matches and the shared semantic meaning. Texts (i.e., pairs of headlines from the news media data and captions from the Facebook data) that exhibited a cosine similarity of 0.8 or higher were defined as matching, indicating that a status post

Table 1. News and Facebook data.

Outlet	Number of EU-related News Articles	Number of Facebook Status Posts	Matched (% of all articles)
Der Standard	31,772	69,847	1,495 (4.71)
Die Presse	31,121	47,088	1,860 (5.98)
Heute	4,858	54,356	82 (1.69)
Kleine Zeitung	23,716	55,764	125 (0.53)
Kronen Zeitung	30,352	54,317	304 (1)
Kurier	33,611	58,367	1,685 (5.01)
Oberösterreichische Nachrichten	20,324	33,820	537 (2.64)
Österreich	11,230	82,562	1,185 (10.55)
Salzburger Nachrichten	17,586	33,455	505 (2.87)
Tiroler Tageszeitung	21,586	46,437	718 (3.33)
Vorarlberger Nachrichten	10,926	9,432	570 (5.22)
Wiener Zeitung	21,622	25,255	1,704 (7.88)
Total	258,704	570,700	10,770 (4.16)

refers to an article and thus user interactions can be seen as a response to this news content (e.g., Trilling et al., 2017). In total, we connected 10,770 (4.16%) of the 258,704 EU-related articles to a status post (see Table 1).

3.4. Independent Variables: Content Analysis

We analyzed news articles about the EU in terms of *proximity*, *conflictuality*, *negativity*, and *emotionality*, using the semi-supervised approaches Newsmap (Watanabe, 2018) and Latent Semantic Scaling (LSS; Watanabe, 2020). While the former automatically constructs a machine learning classifier to detect relations to a country starting from a small dictionary, the latter computes semantic proximity of words in a corpus based on a set of "seed words" that the authors selected manually to define the dimensions of interest.

Proximity. Proximity is here operationalized as the angle promoted in news content about the EU: All analyzed news, thus, is about the EU while the analysis of proximity indicates whether the article is dealing with, e.g., *national* EU politics rather than genuine news about the EU institutions (vertical Europeanization). We used the R package Newsmap (Watanabe, 2018) and applied a machine-learning algorithm to identify the country with which a news article is mostly concerned. Given that not all articles deal with a single country, country-specific topics, or countries per se, we extracted the likelihood ratio. Articles not reaching a qualitatively determined threshold of 0.5 and articles dealing with non-EU countries were labelled as "EU level." Furthermore, the measure classifies articles dealing with specific EU countries that are not neighboring states to Austria, adjacent states, or Austria itself.

Conflictuality, *negativity*, and *emotionality*. To measure these concepts, we relied on the LSS approach and the R package LSX (Watanabe, 2020). Applying LSS, we estimated the semantic proximity of words in the news corpus, selected words that frequently occurred in the immediate context of the EU and weighted them based on their semantic proximity to 5 seed words for each dimension (Table 2). We selected seed words primarily based on our background knowledge but also referred to existing resources such as the augmented German sentiment dictionary (for negativity; Rauh, 2018) and Affective Norms for German Sentiment Terms (ANGST, for emotionality; Schmidtke et al., 2014). In addition to the theoretical angle provided by expert assessment and prior studies, we also ensured that the seed words were relevant to the corpus, checking for a reasonable number of occurrences within the data. As seeds for LSS are bipolar, we furthermore gathered terms indicating the opposite of the three concepts (see Table 2).

Subsequently, we assigned scores for each article as a weighted average of the polarity scores using the fitted LSS models. To assess the accuracy, we compared the scores computed by LSS against manually assigned scores of up to 2,314 articles. We ensured that the measurement errors cancel out each other following earlier studies (for comparable approaches, see Trubowitz & Watanabe, 2021; Young & Soroka, 2012), taking the mean scores of articles in three-month windows. The correlation between the LSS and manual coding reaches satisfactory levels for *conflictuality* ($r = 0.79$), *negativity* ($r = 0.7$), and *emotionality* ($r = 0.62$; see Figure 1).

3.5. Dependent Variables: User Engagement

Our dependent variables concern the counts of all forms of engagement (i.e., all interactions) the platform provides. For all articles in our print media data that could be linked to a Facebook status post, we define the following three variables.

Reactions. Facebook provides a nuanced set of reactions to respond to content on its platform. Users may choose between emoji-like reactions "like," "love," "haha," "wow," "sad," and "angry." However, the only

Table 2. Seed words for conflictuality, negativity, and emotionality.

Conflictuality	
Conflict	Agreement
streit, *drohung*, *konflikt*, *dissens*, *verbündete* (dispute, threat, conflict, dissent, allies)	*stille*, *ruhe*, *harmonie*, *verbundenheit*, *eintracht* (silence, calm, harmony, connectedness, concord)
Negativity	
Negative	Positive
korruption, *anmaßung*, *beschämend*, *fehler*, *terror* (corruption, hubris, disgrace, mistake, terror)	*gerechtigkeit*, *möglichkeit*, *erfolgreich*, *verhandlung*, *gut* (justice, opportunity, success, negotiation, good)
Emotionality	
Emotional	Factual
freiheit, *abenteuer*, *bevormundung*, *euphorie*, *lebendig* (freedom, adventure, paternalism, elation, alive)	*wissenschaft*, *fakt*, *anzahl*, *prozent*, *akkurat*, (percent, accurate, science, fact, quantity)

Note: English translations of the words in parentheses.

reaction available to users through our entire period of the analysis is "like," as more detailed reactions were not introduced until January 2016. The main commonality for all these reactions is that they depict low-threshold forms of engagement (Salgado & Bobba, 2019). As we aim to map the entirety of users' engagement, we use a combined measure of reactions (see Heidenreich & Eberl, 2021, for a similar approach). Before 2016, this includes only "like," whereas from January 2016 onward, this variable is composed of the sum of "like," "love," "haha," "wow," "sad," and "angry" reactions.

Shares. The second form of engagement concerns the sharing behavior of users. Representing the intermediate category of commitment needed to engage with content on social media (Alhabash & McAlister, 2015), sharing means the active forwarding of information to peers (i.e., friends).

Comments. Lastly, we investigate the deliberative aspect of comments, the form of engagement involving the highest commitment of users (Salgado & Bobba, 2019). Here, we record the number of comments in response to a status post referencing an EU-related news article. While individual users can share or interact with a status post only once, commenting is an action that can be performed multiple times by a single person.

3.6. Analytical Strategy: Negative Binomial Regression Model

As the dependent variables are count data that are assumed to stem from an overdispersed Poisson distribution (e.g., variance being much larger than the mean), we implement negative binomial regression models for the analyses. Using the R package brms (Bürkner, 2017), hierarchical, varying intercepts models with parameters computed from 3,000 Markov Chain Monte Carlo samples were estimated. The data were clustered on the outlet level, accounting for users reacting to specific coverage styles differently, and the length of an article was added as a control variable. All models converged properly with *R hat* never exceeding 1.01 (Gelman & Rubin, 1992), MCMC trace plots can be found in the Supplementary Material (see Figure A1 to A3 in the Supplementary Material).

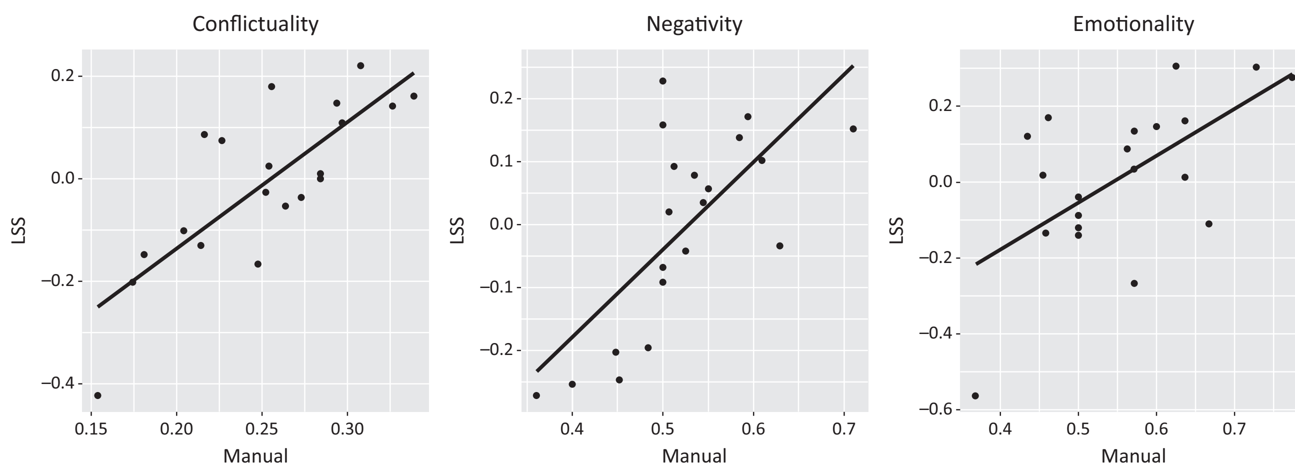

Figure 1. Correlation LSS scores and manual coding.

4. Results

We find that, in general, EU-related news elicit distinctly less engagement from users than other news. While we cannot speak of the content of other news coverage, we find that EU-related articles are shared approximately half as much as non-EU-related news (11.34 to 20.33; see Table 3). Although differences are not equally outspoken concerning comments (34.45 to 40.87) and reactions (75.36 to 118), similar patterns can be observed.

Our first assumption that greater *proximity* leads to increased engagement does, overall, find mixed empirical support. In line with H1, our results show positive coefficients (see Figure 2 or Table A1 in the Supplementary Material), especially for reactions and comments if an article deals mainly with Austria. While

Table 3. User interactions.

	Status Posts referring to EU-related news articles				Status Posts referring to non-EU-related news articles			
Engagement type	Mean	SD	Min	Max	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Share	11.34	35.55	0	1,119	20.33	106.44	0	41,426
Comment	34.45	70.98	0	929	40.87	102.73	0	15,161
Like 👍	61.36	323.26	0	12,266	77.42	319	0	119,044
Love ♡	1.46	7.43	0	309	2.57	25.6	0	7,892
Haha 😆	7.52	26.81	0	837	10.21	42.33	0	3,940
Wow 😮	1.41	5.53	0	297	4.5	17.1	0	2,435
Sad 😢	2.4	11.2	0	364	8.91	52.32	0	7,000
Angry 😠	8.62	38.28	0	891	14.38	68.79	0	5,080
Total Reactions	75.36	303.57	0	12,653	118	362.92	0	119,044
N	10,380				560,320			

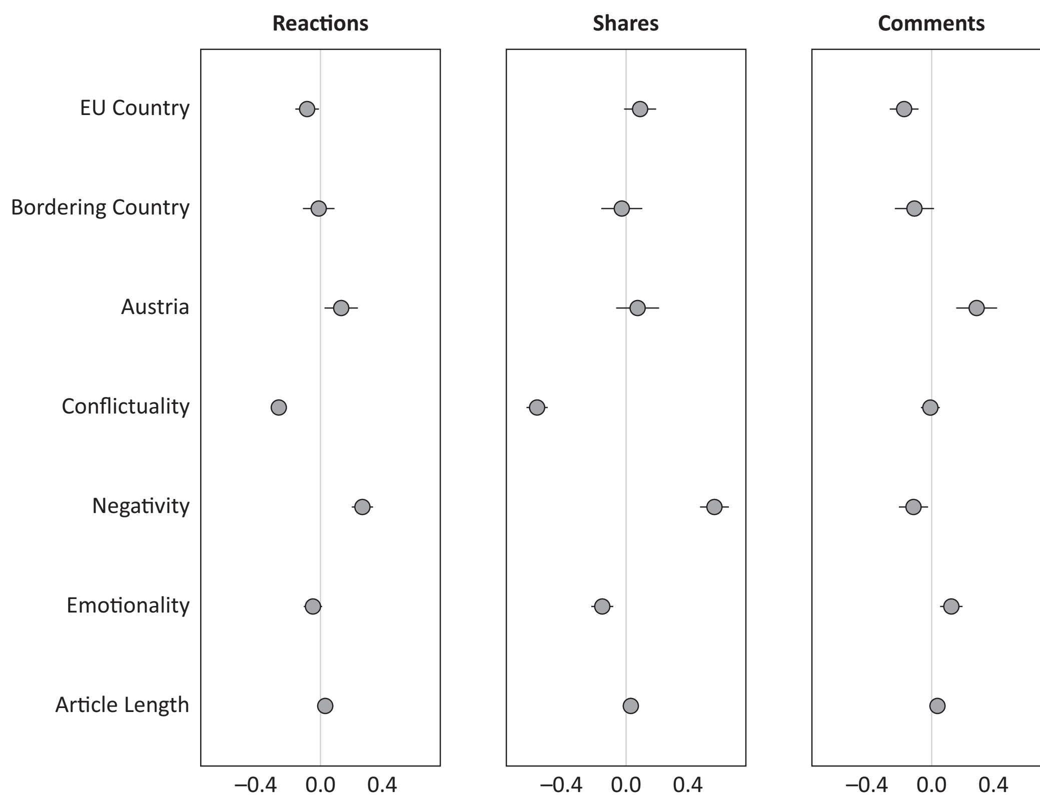

Figure 2. Estimated posterior fixed-effects parameters for reactions, shares, and comments. Notes: Means of posterior samples are represented as dots; thick and thin lines represent 50% and 95% credible intervals, respectively; figures are based on the models for reactions, shares, and comments of Table A1 in the Supplementary Material; *N* = 10,380 for all three models.

this is also true for shares when articles address EU countries that are not Austria or its adjacent states, all other coefficients indicate that engagement does not increase compared to articles dealing with non-EU countries (reference category).

Furthermore, we find no support for H2: While we assumed increased *conflictuality* to elicit more user engagement, findings reveal that the opposite is true for reactions and shares, with the latter distinctly decreasing the more the conflict is discussed. H3, in turn, is partially confirmed: *Negativity* in EU news does increase engagement regarding reactions, shares, but not commenting. Lastly, we expected more emotional language to trigger user engagement (H4) which is not entirely supported by our findings. Greater *emotionality* rather decreases reactions and shares, whereas users are more inclined to comment on such articles.

Please note that in addition to the main analyses shown here, we ran models cutting off the top 1.5% cases regarding reactions, shares, and comments, respectively, to demonstrate the robustness of our findings. The results of these supplementary models can be found in Table A2 in the Supplementary Material.

5. Conclusions

This study set out to further our understanding of which characteristics of EU news content would elicit user engagement on social media. Given the backdrop of the alleged participation deficit, lack of public interest, and increasing public skepticism towards the EU in many countries (Baglioni & Hurrelmann, 2016; de Wilde et al., 2014; Hobolt & De Vries, 2016; Marquart et al., 2018), it appears vital to assess how elite communication through the news media might encourage citizens to engage with EU politics.

Our findings show that, indeed, many of the common factors that explain the shareworthiness of news (e.g., Trilling et al., 2017) or user engagement with news on social media more generally (e.g., Kilgo et al., 2020) also do well in explaining social media users' interactions with EU news. More specifically, however, the actual directions of influences do not always confirm our expectations. This may suggest that EU news might indeed be different from other types of news in the eyes of the audience, a difference that sometimes is postulated in the literature on media and European integration (Boomgaarden et al., 2013) and that forms of engagement might need to be differentiated in more detail.

Overall, users' engagement with EU news was much lower than status posts referring to other topics. This is hardly surprising for a topic that is repeatedly found to be complex and characterized by the remoteness from citizens' everyday political experiences (e.g., Gattermann, 2013; Gattermann et al., 2021; Marquart et al., 2018). We found that *negativity* caused significantly more reactions and sharing (in line with H3), but not commenting where the effect is reversed. As discussed above, commenting is the qualitatively most cognitively demanding type of social media interaction (Salgado & Bobba, 2019). Results may suggest that users are less inclined to enter debates that are already negative. They do, however, not shy away from sharing such content with others or reacting to it, willingly or unwillingly contributing to the spread of negative discourses. Drawing on earlier research (de Wilde et al., 2014; see also Galpin & Trenz, 2019), moreover, the actual contents of comments on EU news are likely to be negative and overall characterized by a populist anti-elite opposition targeting the EU as such instead of a differentiated critical view of selected policies (see also Gattermann et al., 2021 for a discussion of this argument in the context of EU elections). Thus, even though we do not find positive effects on the volume of comments, *negativity* seems crucial in terms of social media engagement with EU news. Moreover, we found that both *conflict* and *emotionality* mostly reduce engagement, contrary to our expectations (H2 and H4). For *emotionality*, it seems that, in contrast to *negativity*, more emotional language may not lead to more reactions and shares but animates users to bring in their perspectives. These findings may be read as positive signs for European integration since news inhibiting conflict regarding the EU does not lead to more social media engagement. Yet, *conflict* in traditional news was also shown to mobilize people (Schuck et al., 2016). Again, reading this against the background of earlier research, *conflict* regarding the EU and its policies or institutions might already represent a more fine-grained discussion than a generalized, "populist" opposition to the EU as an elite project would be willing to accommodate (Galpin & Trenz, 2019). The most negative effect of *emotionality*, then, seems good news from the perspective of deliberative democracy, emphasizing the rational, civil, reason-based, i.e., unemotional, exchange of arguments in public discourse (Habermas, 1962). However, it triggers users to comment on EU news which is seen as the most demanding form of engagement. Coupled with the positive effect for negativity and the analyses of comments conducted in earlier research (e.g., Galpin & Trenz, 2019), it seems that social media engagement with EU news is mainly driven by negativity. Engagement, thus, seems firmly rooted in generalized Euroscepticism (e.g., de Wilde et al., 2014), further aroused by an emotional framing of EU news.

The effects of *proximity* show that a focus on other EU countries (reactions and commenting) leads to significantly less engagement than genuine EU news. Results are, moreover, in line with our expectation (H1) in that the usually prevailing national angle found in traditional EU media coverage (e.g., Boomgaarden et al., 2013) does indeed lead to more social media engagement: We find a positive effect, especially for reacting and commenting. Against the background of the often discussed increasing "audience logic" of digital journalism (e.g., Blassnig & Esser, 2021), it is thus not surprising that journalists still adhere to their focus on the national implications

of EU politics. The greater engagement with national EU news perpetuates the national focus, and thus a Europeanization of public spheres along national borders, a finding which aligns with earlier research comparing Facebook and Twitter (Bossetta et al., 2017). While this result is in line with our expectations, our findings might mirror the specific affordances of Facebook as a communication platform rather than a general representation of how social media users engage with EU news. It thus merits further investigation.

As research on social media in general, our study is not without challenges and limitations. While companies are about to provide researchers with more and more unrestricted access to social media data, gathering communication from the platforms can still be difficult or even impossible, especially when it comes to sites outside of the "usual spectrum" (i.e., Twitter and Facebook). In addition, platform providers nowadays emphasize data protection more than in prior years (and rightfully so), imposing restrictions on access to certain data that could expand the possibilities of social science research and deepen our understanding of dynamics. In the context of this study, this particularly concerns the actual comments. It is currently impossible to gather information on this aspect, barring any research on the actual contents posted in response to status posts. Therefore, research questions interested in unveiling more fine-grained dynamics targeting users' contributions cannot be addressed now. This also means that we cannot assess what the engagement with EU news, as operationalized in this study, might mean in terms of legitimacy or support for the EU as such. Moreover, social media communication is often heavily focused on visual content, which could also help explain the users' engagement (e.g., Farkas & Bene, 2021). Studies that only focus on textual elements thus might neglect one important aspect of communication on these platforms. Lastly, we need to acknowledge that the interpretation of the different forms of engagement remains somewhat ambiguous. Although initial studies show how certain reaction types may be mapped to distinct emotional responses from users or vice versa (e.g., de León & Trilling, 2021; Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020; Zerback & Wirz, 2021), it is not entirely clear how responses such as certain Facebook reaction types (e.g., "haha" or "wow"), sharing, or the context-less act of commenting should be interpreted. Results from such studies, thus, need to be assessed with caution or put into a broader context as we did in this study.

In addition to these general challenges coming with the investigation of social media content, this research faced further limitations. First, the linking of media content with Facebook posts appeared to be challenging. As journalists vary the content for social media, headlines are not one-to-one matchable, complicating the linkage of data. While we tried our best to assure that media content was indeed associated with a respective status post on Facebook, the approach linking both data sources using a cosine similarity measure does not come without errors. Future research, thus, may implement qualitative approaches to reproduce the findings of our study. Second, the measurement of *conflictuality*, *negativity*, and *emotionality* using LSS (Watanabe, 2020) is heavily dependent on pre-processing steps as well as seed word selection. Guided by existing sources of semantically loaded terms, we tried to choose seed words systematically, yet the limited selection might not always reflect the spectrum of the respective concepts as defined in prior studies. However, with the scaling approach accounting for this aspect and the comparison to our manually coded data, we are confident that our measures do indeed pick up the concepts as intended. Third, our study is largely exploratory in that it focuses only on general EU news on Facebook. Future research should add to the debate by comparing platforms and distinguishing the different issues discussed in the news, which would deepen our understanding of what topics drive user engagement and how different platforms influence it.

Despite the limitations mentioned, our study provides a unique, comprehensive perspective on how elite communication from newspapers may trigger public engagement in general and for the EU. It thereby informs the debate about the EU's participation deficit and its contested democratic credentials. Our study resonates with earlier research in that it finds results converging on Euroscepticism. Nonetheless, it also opens interesting avenues for future research and may, thereby, help to spark a broader academic debate on citizens' social media engagement with the EU.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

A Bird's Eye View: Supranational EU Actors on Twitter

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Abstract
Given the politicization of European integration, effective public communication by the European Union (EU) has gained importance. Especially for rather detached supranational executives, social media platforms offer unique opportunities to communicate to and engage with European citizens. Yet, do supranational actors exploit this potential? This article provides a bird's eye view by quantitatively describing almost one million tweets from 113 supranational EU accounts in the 2009–2021 period, focusing especially on the comprehensibility and publicity of supranational messages. We benchmark these characteristics against large samples of tweets from national executives, other regional organizations, and random Twitter users. We show that the volume of supranational Twitter has been increasing, that it relies strongly on the multimedia features of the platform, and outperforms communication from and engagement with other political executives on many dimensions. However, we also find a highly technocratic language in supranational messages, skewed user engagement metrics, and high levels of variation across institutional and individual actors and their messages. We discuss these findings in light of the legitimacy and public accountability challenges that supranational EU actors face and derive recommendations for future research on supranational social media messages.

Keywords
European Union; political communication; politicization; social media; text analysis

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1. Introduction: Why We Should Care About Supranational Twitter Activity

The European Union (EU) has an increasingly precarious relationship with its citizens. Incidences such as the failure of constitutional referenda in 2005, the raging debates about supranational authority during the Euro and Schengen crises after 2009 and 2015, the Brexit decision of 2016, and more generally, the success of Euroscepticism in national and European election campaigns exemplify the growing politicization of European integration in which a permissive consensus among the wider citizenry cannot be taken for granted (de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Hooghe & Marks, 2009; Rauh, 2021a).

In these controversial public debates, especially the EU's supranational institutions are frequent addressees, often serving as a scapegoat for unpopular policies (Gerhards et al., 2009; Harteveld et al., 2018; Heinkelmann-Wild & Zangl, 2020; Rittberger et al., 2017; Schlipphak & Treib, 2017; Traber et al., 2020). Supranational institutions can try to influence these debates as well, and they seem to start approaching their public communication strategically (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018, 2020; Rauh, 2021c; Rauh et al., 2020). Yet and still, the extant literature attests various communication deficits rooted in either the internal setup of supranational institutions or in external obstacles they face in traditional media (e.g., Altides, 2009; Boomgaarden et al., 2013; Brüggemann, 2010).

Much hope is ascribed to social media in this setting. Theoretical analyses and case studies suggest that their transnational outreach, low costs of messaging, and an emphasis on user engagement render social media particularly attractive for the otherwise rather detached supranational institutions (e.g., Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Krzyżanowski, 2020; Zaiotti, 2020). However, extant large-n social media studies focus only on EU actors with direct electoral accountability, such as the Council and European Parliament (EP) representatives (European Parliament Directorate General for Parliamentary Research Services, 2021; Fazekas et al., 2021; Haßler et al., 2021; Nulty et al., 2016; Umit, 2017), thereby neglecting exactly those executive institutions that citizens most strongly associate with the EU as a polity (Silva et al., 2021).

Thus, this article provides an encompassing mapping of how supranational institutions and actors use Twitter, a key social media platform. Our quantitative description of more than 960,000 supranational tweets from 113 accounts in the 2009–2021 period is guided by two questions. First, we ask to what extent supranational messages are geared to be comprehensible by the wider citizenry. We thus aggregate linguistic and media features of supranational tweets. Second, we ask to what extent supranational engagement generates publicity. Here, we quantify direct on-platform user engagement and relate it to the features of supranational messages.

Benchmarking these indicators to large samples of messages from random users, national executive institutions, and other regional organizations shows that supranational executives of the EU increasingly embrace social media. Message output has grown markedly and, while the text of supranational messages is still comparatively hard to access for the average citizen, supranational actors champion non-textual communication, enriching their messages with visual content, external links, and meta-linguistic elements such as emojis much more often than other executives do. In terms of publicity, the number of followers has been strongly increasing at least for some supranational EU actors. But direct user engagement rates remain low in absolute terms and are more or less comparable to those of national executives. On many dimensions, we furthermore find notable differences between institutional and personal EU accounts, suggesting that more personalized communication is associated with more citizen engagement. Against the backdrop of public EU politicization and traditional communication deficits, our bird's eye view on supranational Twitter thus offers fruitful guidance for further research on executive public EU communication on social media.

2. Effective Supranational Communication and the Potential of Social Media

Communication is vital for the legitimacy of political systems. Addressees of political authority usually demand some form of justification. Authority holders thus engage in nurturing the belief in their claim to rule among relevant audiences (Tallberg & Zürn, 2019; Weber, 2013, p. 450). For supranational EU institutions, this has become a more challenging task. Beyond their traditional audiences—delegating principals in the Council, sometimes in the EP, or specific stakeholders in the respective policy area—growing public EU politicization renders the wider European citizenry a relevant audience as well (Rauh, 2021a).

Reaching this audience is especially important for the otherwise rather detached supranational institutions. For political authorities without direct accountability mechanisms such as elections, specific and diffuse support become blurred quite quickly. Where the general public has no direct routes to hold decision makers to account, specific unfavorable policy choices or misconduct of office holders can easily damage the popular legitimacy of the political system as a whole. In a politicized context, disagreement with policy choices may quickly turn into more fundamental "polity contestation" (de Wilde & Trenz, 2012).

It is thus unsurprising that communication efforts of institutions beyond the nation state respond to politicization shocks (Bressanelli et al., 2020; Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2018; Rauh et al., 2020; Schimmelfennig, 2020). We do not know, however, to what extent the resulting messages are suited to reach the wider citizenry in the first place. In this article, we are interested in two message characteristics that we consider necessary conditions for effective public self-legitimation of any specific type or content.

The first condition is *comprehensibility*. In order to reach the average citizen, as opposed to the specialized and highly knowledgeable traditional audiences, supranational messages should not be overly demanding in terms of the cognitive mobilization required to decipher their political content. Citizens integrate information into their political knowledge structure much better if it is delivered in an easy-to-comprehend manner (Bischof & Senninger, 2018; Tolochko et al., 2019). To have any effect on citizens' legitmacy beliefs about supranational institutions, the messages have to be comprehensible in the first place. Moreover, citizens explicitly want the EU to be more transparent (Schafer et al., 2021).

The second condition is *publicity*. Publicity refers to the degree to which the broader audience, as opposed to atomized individuals, engages with the issues, acts, and processes of the political system (Hüller, 2007). Comprehending the information is not enough if citizens do not engage with it, digest it, and actively link it to debates they care about. Only with a sufficient degree of publicity can supranational communication be expected to influence both individuals' perception of supranational institutions and the broader public debate about the European polity.

Supranational institutions, however, face serious obstacles for comprehensible messaging with high

degrees of publicity. Parts of these obstacles are internal. We know that supranational communication is often subject to internal conflicts and competition over limited resources (Altides, 2009; Bijsmans & Altides, 2007; Hartlapp et al., 2014, Chapter 9). In institutions with delegated powers that involve high levels of expertise, consensus orientation, and diplomatic restraint, public outreach has traditionally also been a secondary concern (Brüggemann, 2010; Meyer, 1999). Moreover, supranational institutions may try to evade controversial debates by avoiding clear communication (Biegoń, 2013; Bressanelli et al., 2020; de Wilde & Zürn, 2012; Schimmelfennig, 2020). Traditional communication efforts such as press releases or public speeches of supranational actors are thus often hardly comprehensible for the average citizen (Rauh, 2021b; Rauh et al., 2020).

Against these internal constraints on comprehensible messaging, social media offer attractive features to supranational institutions. First, costs are comparatively low: It takes mere minutes to set up an account and they are easy to maintain. Second, social media platforms usually incentivize clear and concise messages that are also cheaper to produce and to distribute than, for instance, press releases. Third, social media offer various multimedia features that aid message comprehension beyond textual content (Tang & Hew, 2018).

Other obstacles are external. Supranational institutions focus on the European interest, but mass-mediated public spheres tend to be fractured along national borders, languages, and media systems (Koopmans & Statham, 2010; Risse, 2014; Trenz, 2004; Walter, 2017). National media are rather selective in covering EU affairs, as traditional journalistic selection logics are often partial to national interests, domestic executives, and their challengers (De Vreese, 2001; De Vreese et al., 2006; Trenz, 2008). Media coverage of the EU is then primarily driven by controversial and contested events such as summits of the heads of state and government, EP elections, and scandals on the European level (Boomgaarden et al., 2013; Hobolt & Tilley, 2014). Thus, supranational institutions have a hard time to achieve positive publicity via traditional media channels.

Social media platforms hold promise here as well. They provide users with a low-hurdle continuous information source that does not require conscious information search. Moreover, social media allow citizens to engage with content beyond fractured national boundaries (Bossetta et al., 2017). Users may encounter supranational messages in their timelines, through their connections, or they could simply follow the respective accounts by a simple click. Furthermore, social media imbue users with a degree of gatekeeping power (Wallace, 2018). The decentralized structure allows choosing which messages to amplify. This gives supranational EU actors as well as citizens some freedom to circumvent traditional media selection logics in generating publicity. Moreover, social media, specifically Twitter, can act as a "double-barrelled gun": recent research shows that journalists tend to pick up tweets from political actors when they have gone viral and incorporate them in traditional news (Cage et al., 2020; Oschatz et al., 2021).

To be sure, social media hardly offer a panacea to the EU's communication deficits, but they do promise an additional communication channel with attractive features to overcome obstacles for comprehensible supranational messaging to the average citizen with higher levels of publicity. However, do supranational executives actually exploit this potential?

3. Data: Supranational Tweets and Benchmarks

Our analyses focus on Twitter for three reasons. Among all social media platforms, Twitter has acquired the most significant place in the decidedly political communication environments during the recent decade (Jungherr, 2016; Segesten & Bossetta, 2017; Stier et al., 2018). As noted above, Twitter is also consumed and often amplified by journalists and, unlike its main competitor, Facebook, it has recently opened up access to historical data, which enables the kind of research presented here.

Using official EU webpages, we thus first identified all Twitter accounts of supranational executive institutions (i.e., excluding the intergovernmental and parliamentary branches of the EU). We include their main accounts (e.g., @EU_Commission), their individual subbranches (e.g., @EUHomeAffairs), and specialized EU agencies (e.g., @Frontex). In addition, we identified all accounts of individuals heading these institutions such as Presidents (e.g., @vonderleyen), Commissioners (e.g., @TimmermansEU), or Director-Generals (e.g., @lemaitre_eu). Including individuals is motivated by discussions about the personalization of supranational politics. "Giving a face" to institutions and personalized competition for EU office is a long-discussed strategy to channel the politicization of EU affairs (e.g., Hix, 1997). Even if the related *Spitzenkandidaten* process was never fully institutionalized, scholars observe a growing presidentialization of executive EU institutions (Hamřík, 2021; Kassim et al., 2017) and increased parliamentary scrutiny of leading EU officials (Wille, 2013). Moreover, the informal style on social media might be more akin to personalized communication. Thus, we also want to learn whether institutional and personal accounts differ in their comprehensibility and publicity.

Resorting to accounts active in May 2021 and officially verified to represent the respective person or organization by Twitter (the blue checkmark badge), we cover 70 institutional and 43 personal accounts. For each of these accounts, we then collect the full corpus of tweets they issued between joining Twitter (or the day of assuming executive EU office for personal accounts) and May 3, 2021 (one day before data collection) through the Twitter API 2.0 academic track. We arrive at a total population of 960,831 supranational social media messages.

This offers a thus far unprecedented empirical perspective on supranational social media usage, which is hard to judge in absolute terms. We thus locate supranational communication patterns in *three benchmark datasets*. The first benchmark establishes "normal" behavior on the platform through a by-and-large random sample of tweets. We streamed in tweets from 26 EU countries for a week with five-minute windows through Twitter Decahose API using "country b-box" as selection criterion. This generates a baseline of 83,823 "typical'' tweets.

More importantly, the particular legitimacy and communication challenges of supranational actors emerge from the EU's nature as an unidentified political object, in the words of Jacques Delors (1985). On the one hand, its competencies approximate that of national executives. On the other, supranational executives are sometimes viewed as mere agents where member states guide and decide the exercise of political authority. Two benchmarks thus respectively address these different levels of governance.

To approximate social media communication of national executives, we target government ministers, ministries, executive offices, agencies, and individuals in charge of these institutions from the United Kingdom (UK). This country choice is initially pragmatic as English is the lingua franca of supranational tweets (see appendix A1 in the Supplementary File) and UK tweets can thus be directly benchmarked on our text-based indicators below. But the UK is also a substantially meaningful benchmark in the sense that, in terms of the social media penetration of its population, it is among the top 10 countries on the European continent, providing reason to assume that UK executives take this communication channel seriously. Collecting data analogously to the supranational EU actors, our UK sample ultimately yields 2,218,278 tweets from 72 institutional and 99 personal accounts.

Our third and final benchmark covers other regional organizations; that is, institutions in which a set of countries from a particular region pool or delegate certain political competences. The EU is arguably an extreme outlier in terms of pooling and delegation. It is less of an outlier, however, on the number of jointly decided policy areas. Thus, we identify a set of regional organizations, such as ASEAN, which have a roughly similar policy scope, picking those that are in the range of one standard deviation around the EU with regard to the number of policy areas coded in the MIA dataset (Hooghe et al., 2017). We then collected respective Twitter accounts from the list created and kindly shared by Ecker-Erhardt (2020). This results in 55 accounts having published 294,219 individual tweets.

In total, we compare the full population of 960,831 supranational tweets between 2009 and early 2021 to more than 2.6 million of such social media messages from random users and other executives on the national and regional level. The samples as well as the full list of EU, UK, and regional organizations' accounts are available for inspection in appendices A5–A8 in the Supplementary File.

The sheer volume of supranational social media messages already suggests that this communication channel is taken seriously. This holds when we consider the average number of tweets per supranational account and day over time, and compare these values to the UK and other regional organizations (Figure 1).

The number of supranational Twitter messages has increased nearly seven-fold from roughly one tweet every second day in 2009 to around 3.5 daily tweets during the last five years. The major growth period during 2010–2016 coincides with a growing overall prominence

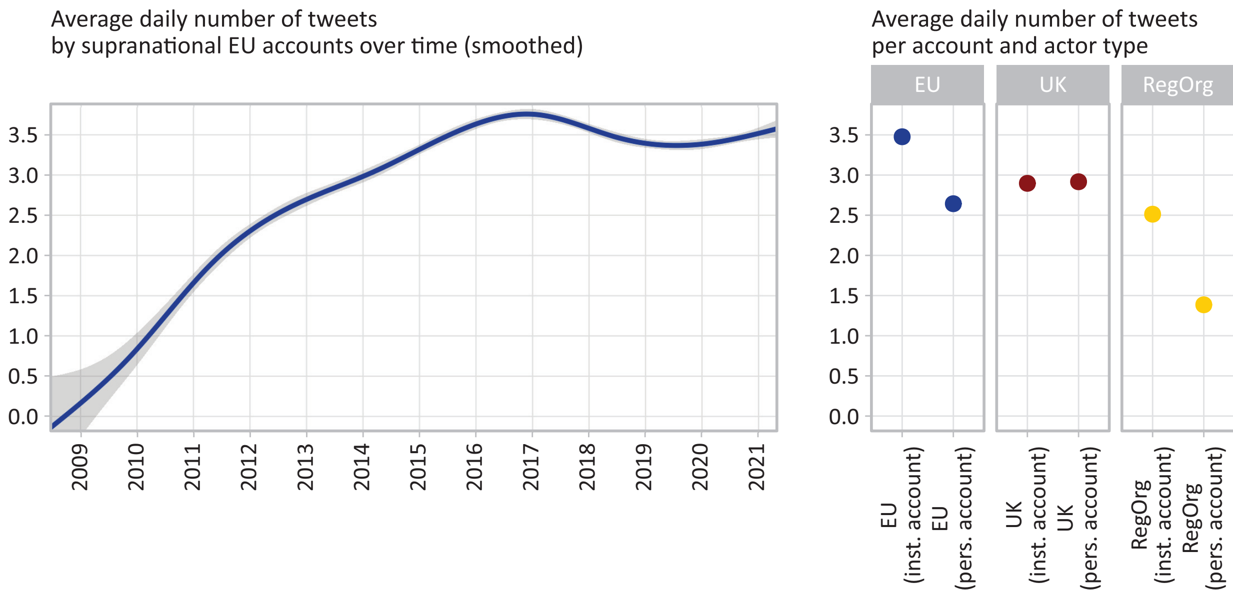

Figure 1. Tweet volume summaries.

of Twitter. It also coincides with a strongly surging EU politicization amidst the Euro and Schengen crises, as well as with a notable reduction in the number of press releases from the European Commission (Rauh, 2021b). The growth we see may thus be explained by a mix of enhanced opportunity in this particular medium, increased strategic incentives from a politicized context, and a deliberate re-distribution of internal communication resources towards social media.

On the right-hand side of Figure 1, we see that this supranational tweet volume is driven largely by institutional accounts, also pointing to a planned approach to supranational social media presence. Across almost 13 years of supranational Twitter presence, institutional EU accounts emitted around 3.5 tweets per day, while supranational actors tweeting in personal capacity issued around one daily tweet less. The importance that supranational actors ascribe to this medium is also highlighted comparatively. The institutional accounts outperform executives both on the national and the regional level while individual executives are only marginally behind their peers on the national level.

There is variation, however. Among the most avid tweeters are the Commission's Directorate-General for Digital Policies (@DigitalEU, 13.7 daily tweets) and the official account of the whole EU Commission run by the spokespersons service (@EU_Commission, 10.4 daily tweets). On the lower end, we find the European Court of Justice (@EUCourtPress) with around one tweet every second day and the Euratom Supply Agency (@EuratomA) issuing a message only around every 10 days on average. Yet, this variation in supranational tweet volume (standard deviation: 2.58 daily tweets) is not really distinct from our UK sample (2.23 daily tweets), and is markedly lower than in our sample of regional organizations (4 daily tweets).

Therefore, in terms of sheer volume, EU supranational actors appear to be equally keen, if not keener than, as their peers to embark on public communication via Twitter. Volume alone, however, does not tell us whether the messages are actually geared to reach the wider European citizenry. Rather, we have identified comprehensibility and publicity as necessary conditions for effective public communication. We thus turn to more targeted indicators for both concepts in the two subsequent sections.

4. The Comprehensibility of Supranational Twitter Messages

4.1. Text Comprehensibility

For the question of whether supranational messages are comprehensible for the average citizen, the texts that supranational actors publish on Twitter provide key evidence. Scholars and pundits alike have repeatedly stressed that more communication does not help if it does not clarify—but rather obfuscates—political responsibilities (Fairclough, 2003; Fowler et al., 1979; Orwell, 1946). Especially detached and highly specialized institutions are accused to resort to a rather technocratic language, which requires high levels of formal education, uses specialized jargon, and gives priority to abstract developments rather than to political agency (Moretti & Pestre, 2015; Rauh, 2021b; Thibault, 1991).

We operationalise these ideas along the validated text analysis tools provided by Benoit et al. (2019), and extract three variables from the English-language elements of each tweet (details in appendices A1 and A2 in the Supplementary File). First, the Flesch reading ease score measures syntactic complexity. This compound indicator of sentence and word length captures the required cognitive mobilization needed to grasp the textual content of a message (often mapped to formal education levels). Second, we measure the familiarity of the words in a tweet by their average frequency in the overall Google Books corpus as the broadest available representation of the general English language. Words that are more common are better known to and thus more readily comprehensible by a broad audience. Third, we use the verb-to-noun ratio to capture whether tweets help to make choices and processes transparent. Linguists stress that texts express political agency better when they resort to a verbal as opposed to a nominal style (Biber et al., 1998, p. 65). Using many nouns and nominalizations prioritizes abstract objects and processes over action. A higher share of verbs, in contrast, clarifies who did what, and provides more information on the temporal order of events and processes. Figure 2 presents the benchmarks for these three linguistic indicators of comprehensibility.

Compared to other regional organizations, supranational EU tweets send less complex messages with more familiar vocabulary. But in this comparison, they perform worse in clarifying agency through a more verbal style. More importantly, all three indicators suggest that the text of supranational social media messages is significantly harder to comprehend for the average citizen when compared to random Twitter messages or especially to the tweets of national institutions and executives. This clearly reaffirms a rather technocratic language of supranational communication that has been found in press releases as well (Rauh, 2021b).

But notable variation within the supranational population exists. Based on standardized averages of the three indicators, the messages by current Commission President Von der Leyen, Commissioners Timmermans and Vestager, and Matthew Baldwin (European Coordinator for Road Safety) are easiest to understand. The least accessible messages—on average—are sent by the European Maritime Safety Agency, by the Commission Director-General for Competition Policy (ironically headed by the clearly communicating Margrethe Vestager), Justice Commissioner Reynders, and the European Defence Agency. Averaged across indicators, supranational tweets from personal

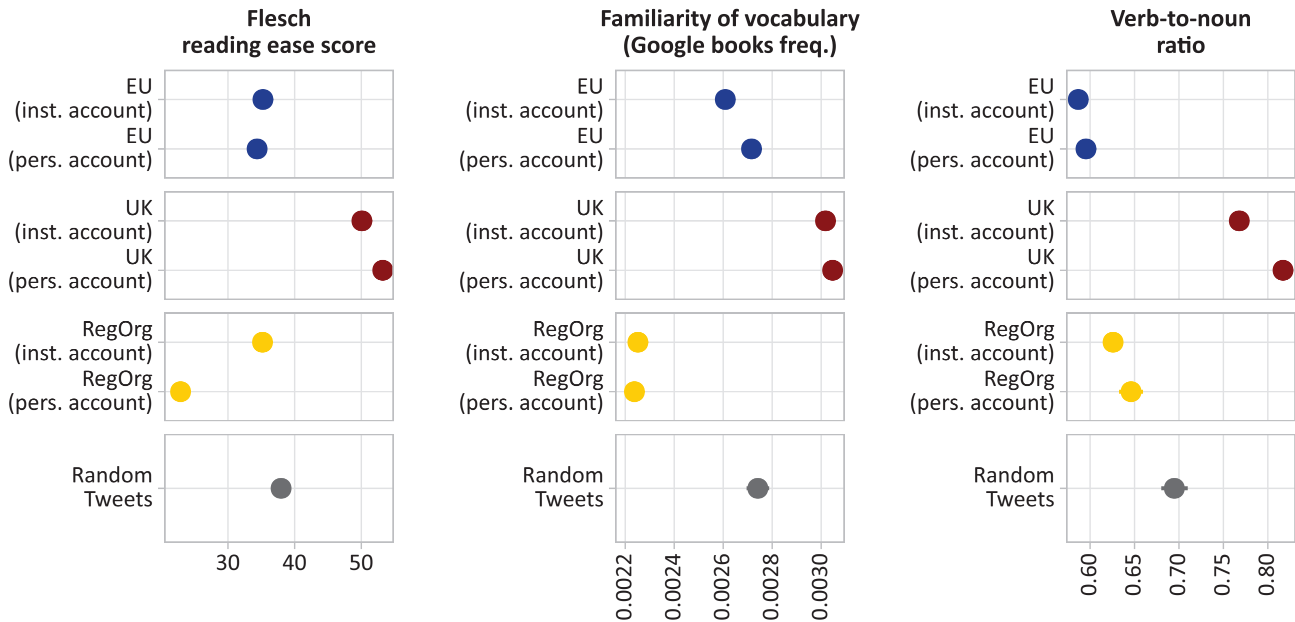

Figure 2. Ease of read measures of tweets.

accounts tend to be easier to comprehend than tweets from institutional accounts.

4.2. Media Content

Beyond text, social media—Twitter in particular—offer multimedia features designed to attract attention and generate engagement. Symbols, pictures, or audio-visuals transmit large amounts of non-textual information, thereby aiding message comprehension (Tang & Hew, 2018). We assess whether and to what extent supranational actors use this additional communication potential by retrieving embedded pictures, videos, and external links from the URL entities field in the Twitter API, and by collecting emojis and other special symbols from the tweet text. Figure 3 benchmarks the resulting data.

The top left panel of Figure 3 shows that more than 40% of all supranational tweets include at least one embedded picture. This clearly exceeds picture usage in the tweets by domestic political actors as well as by institutional accounts of other regional organizations. Videos also appear frequently in supranational tweets, at least in relative terms. Institutional supranational accounts feature a video in around 6% of all messages, which is only surpassed by the 8% of messages from national executive institutions in the UK.

Twitter is notorious for popularizing special characters and especially emoticons in public communication. The lower left panel of Figure 3 indicates that supranational EU tweeters champion such special symbols as well and much more than their executive peers. Additional analyses show that the by far most used symbol is the EU flag, appearing more than 50,000 times and thus in more than 5% of all supranational tweets. Flags of different individual countries appear in a combined total of about 7% of tweets. Beyond that, supranational actors like to use various pointing hand and arrow symbols, a pictogram of the globe, and various versions of checkmark symbols.

Finally, messages can be enriched by links to external online content (often provided as a media thumbnail in tweets) which facilitates further information-seeking for message recipients. On this feature supranational tweets are on par with or even exceed the shares of tweets with external links observed for domestic or regional executives. About 60% to 80% of all supranational messages refer to an external online source. Where these links lead citizens to cannot be fully ascertained as around 41% use URL shortening services. Yet, in the remainder, we see that supranational actors primarily refer to EU websites within the europa.eu domain (35% of all external URLs), pointing message recipients especially to information from the European Commission's servers. A sizeable share of around 5% of external links point to other social media platforms, notably Facebook, LinkedIn, and Instagram. Supranational actors also use services that automatically post content across different social media accounts (e.g., the dlvr.it domain accounts for around 3% of all external links).

All in all, supranational actors try to aid message comprehension by exploiting the multimedia features that Twitter offers, partially more so than their peers on the national or regional level.

5. Publicity of Supranational Messages

As argued above, putting a supranational message on the ether is hardly enough. To affect wider legitimacy

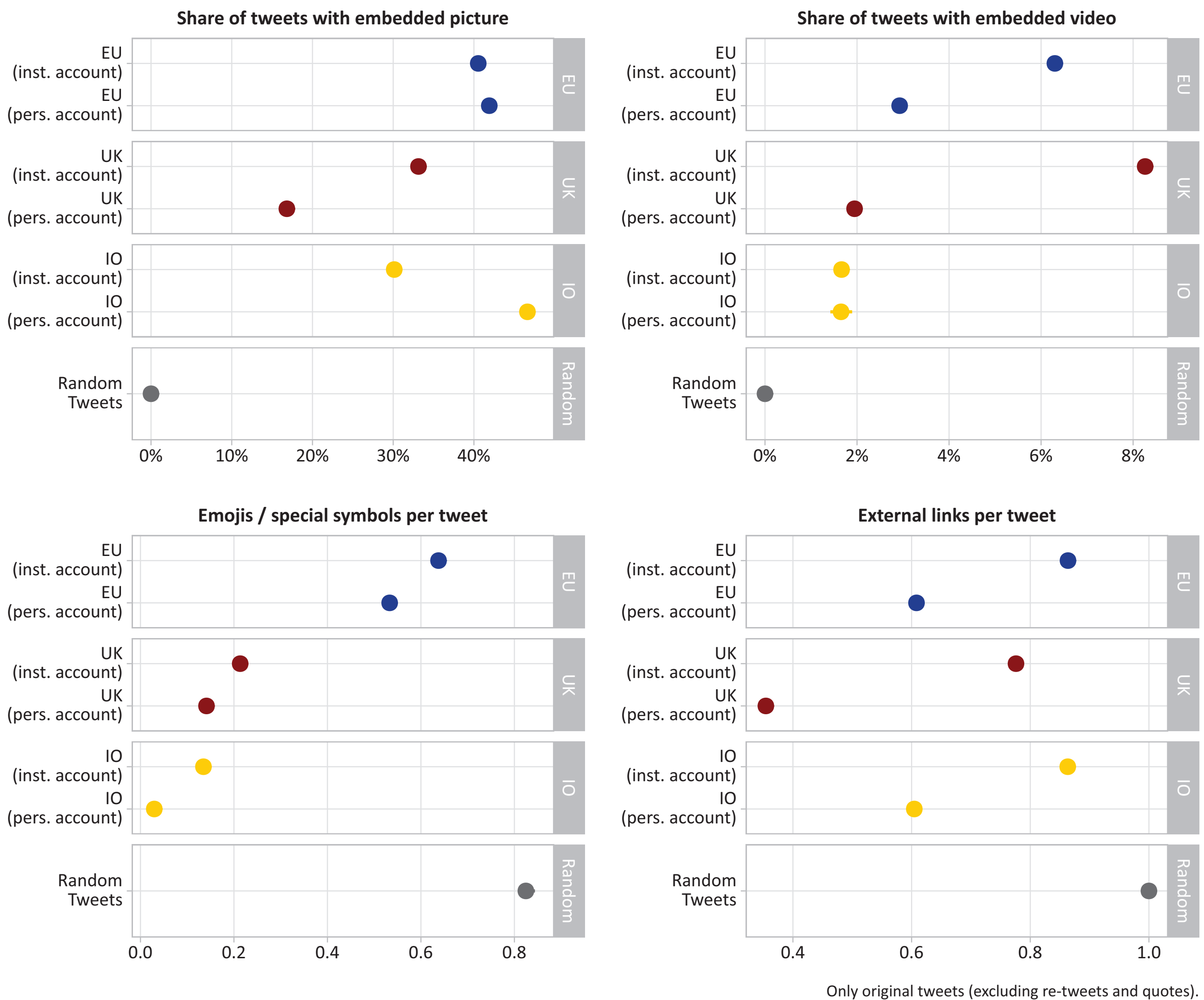

Figure 3. Non-textual element use in tweets.

beliefs, supranational communication needs to engage citizens to generate publicity. Our observational setting can unfortunately not ascertain who actually receives supranational tweets and what is triggered on part of these recipients. But the Twitter data allow—to some extent—analyzing at least the on-platform engagement of users.

An initial publicity indicator is the number of users who subscribe to or "follow" supranational accounts. As the Twitter APIs unfortunately do not offer respective historical data, we developed and share scripts extracting this information whenever an archive.org snapshot of the individual profile is available (see Appendix A3 in the Supplementary File). This shows that the growing volume of supranational tweets was followed by partially also dramatically increasing numbers of subscribers of supranational accounts. Yet, these follower counts are strongly right skewed, and this bias to few selected supranational accounts intensified over time. The by far most prominent account is @EU_Commission with 1,491,171 followers as of May 4, 2021, followed by the institutional accounts of the European Council President (1,194,648 followers) and the European Central Bank (627,385). The most prominent personal accounts are Commission president Von der Leyen (587,814 followers), Competition Commissioner Vestager (295,650), and the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borell (202,519). Personal accounts have on average 13,000 followers less than institutional accounts, but this difference is not statistically significant, indicating sizeable variation within both groups. At the lower end of the distribution, we find several Commission Directors-General as well as the Euratom Supply Agency with only 78 followers.

To study the average publicity of individual supranational messages, we analyze the on-platform engagement features Twitter offers. Users can like messages, may amplify or contextualize them by retweets or quotes, or can reply publicly. We collect the counts of these engagements in response to each original tweet. This raw data can be misleading as the engagement counts are constrained by the number of users that

have seen a supranational message in the first place. Since the Twitter APIs unfortunately does not offer this number of "impressions," we normalize engagement counts against the interpolated number of followers at the time an account has published the respective tweet. Figure 4 plots these engagement ratios against our equally treated benchmark samples.

These data provide three main insights. First, supranational messages receive as much Twitter user engagement as messages from executive actors and institutions at the national and regional levels. Supranational messages are, in fact, slightly more frequently liked and retweeted than those from national institutions and actors in the UK. Only UK actors tweeting in personal capacity received a markedly higher share of quotes and replies on their messages. Second, across all samples, Twitter users tend to engage more strongly with personal accounts than with institutional ones. Personalization of political messaging seems to matter on this social medium, and this holds for supranational EU actors as well. Third, direct engagement with executive tweets is not particularly high in absolute terms. On average, the number of direct engagements with supranational tweets by either liking, retweeting, quoting, or replying does not exceed a share of 0.14% of the number of users following the respective account.

There are a few extreme outliers, however. For example, 18 tweets from our supranational sample receive an engagement rate that exceeds 30% of the followers at the time the message was published. Table 1 provides six illustrative examples for such supranational tweets with extraordinary publicity on Twitter. We cannot readily generalize from so few outlying examples, but we note that the most engaging tweets in our sample invoke highly politicized EU issues. Examples are Commissioner Dalli's stance on LGBTI rights in Poland, the Frontex tweet including surveillance footage from the Mediterranean Sea (leading to a heated Twitter debate about whether priority should be given to sea rescue or the fight against human trafficking), the European Court of Justice's announcement that the UK may unilaterally revoke its withdrawal request, and the farewell note from the European Medicines Agency when finally leaving London due to Brexit.

These outliers also suggest that comprehensibility and publicity may be partially related. We see, for example, clear and concise language, numerous emojis, and embedded media links. How much these characteristics affect user engagement is hard to model exactly, as the proceedings of the Twitter algorithms are not known and tweet virality seems to follow partially endogenous dynamics and punctuated patterns. However, a solely exploratory multivariate perspective (appendix A4 in the Supplementary File) provides additional initial hints. Higher readability and a more verbal style of a tweet is associated with modestly higher user

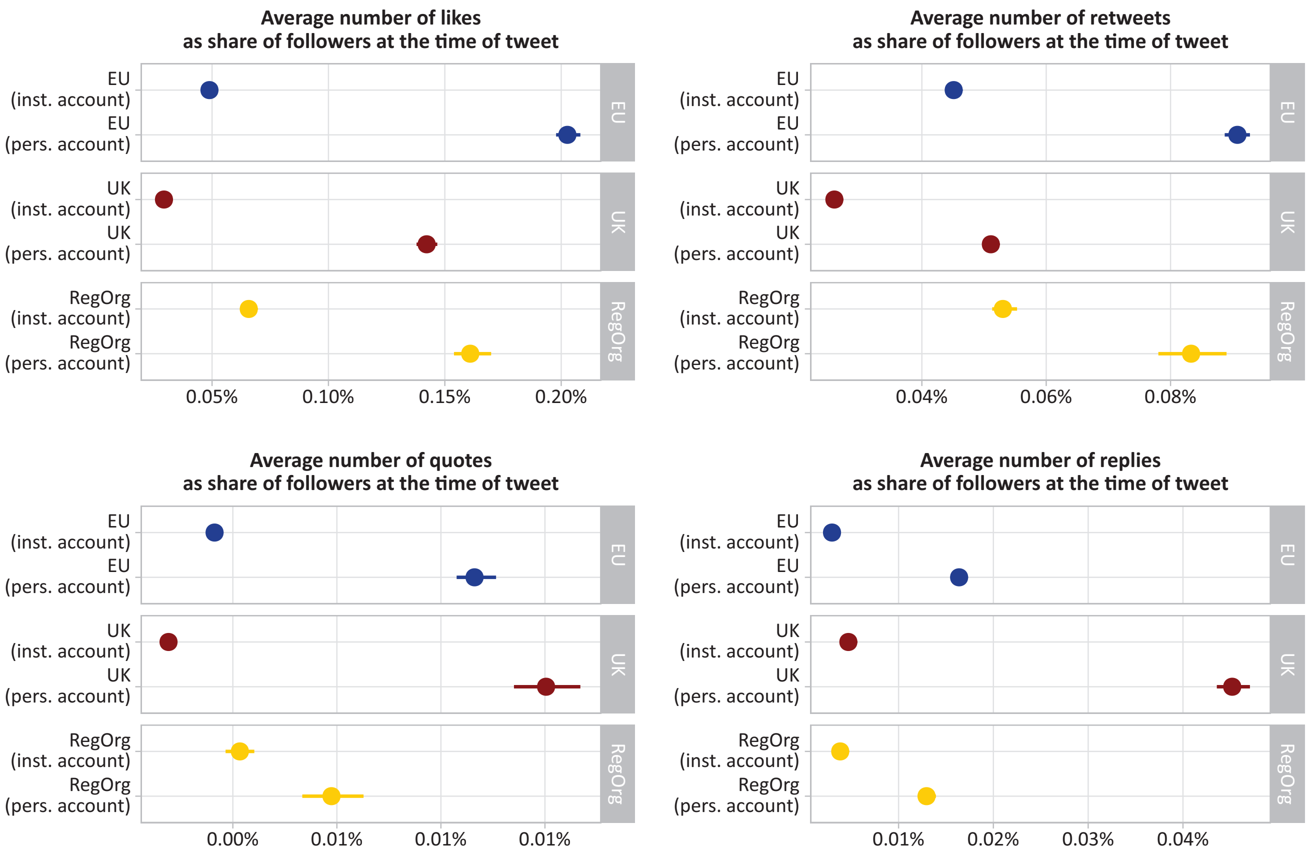

Figure 4. Engagement rates on Twitter.

Table 1. Supranational tweet examples with extraordinary engagement rates.

Tweet	Account	Date	Followers	All direct engagements
Meet Mismo 🐶, a customs sniffer dog, who will tell you all about his job. #50CU #DogsWithJobs More info about the 50th anniversary of the EU #CustomsUnion: https://t.co/tD9clkog5q https://t.co/5MXpNH3Fqy	@EU_Taxud	2018-06-15	11,197	9,916
EU values and fundamental rights must be respected by Member States and state authorities. This is why 6 town twinning applications invilving Polish authorities that adopted 'LGBTI free zones' or 'family rights' resolutions were rejected. #LGBTI #UnionOfEquality	@helenadalli	2020-07-28	9,756	8,036
look at THIS !! The WHOLE core centre of brussels to go to 20kph for the summer from 1 May with priority to giving space to🚶‍♀️🚲 to exercise. Using the challenges of #CoronaVirus to rethink and transform mobility…right here in Brussels…👍👏🙏 https://t.co/RgmJNBgx89	@BaldwinMatthew_	2020-04-20	6,102	4,314
Wait, wait. Why is that fishing trawler towing an empty wooden boat at high seas??? https://t.co/psy2z6z9Wp	@Frontex	2019-06-22	23,214	11,861
Today, EMA staff lowered the 28 EU flags and symbolically said goodbye to their London offices. Guido Rasi expressed his thanks to the UK for its contribution to the work of the Agency and for having been a gracious host of EMA since 1995. https://t.co/KpsBvaXt42	@EMA_News	2019-01-25	39,251	18,853
#ECJ: UK is free to unilaterally revoke the notification of its intention to withdraw from the EU—Case C-621/18 Wightman #Brexit https://t.co/KUOI2eQ48C	@EUCourtPress	2018-12-10	45,522	18,736

engagement ratios. Visual information—embedded pictures and emojis—show an even stronger association with on-platform user engagement. Notably, even when controlling for such message characteristics, the advantage of personal accounts in triggering user engagement appears to be even more pronounced. Clearly, the relationships between message comprehensibility and user engagement warrant further research (cf. Firouzjaei & Özdemir, 2020).

6. Conclusions

In the face of public politicization, popular legitimacy challenges, and notable communication obstacles, social media hold many promises as an additional channel through which the otherwise detached executive supranational actors of the EU can reach out to the citizenry. Thus far, however, an aggregate picture on whether and how these actors exploit the potential of social media has been lacking. We thus provide a bird's eye perspective analyzing and benchmarking the full population of the almost one million messages that 113 supranational Twitter accounts emitted in the 2009–2021 period.

Our encompassing description shows that the volume of supranational social media communication has grown markedly since 2010, having reached or even exceeding the number of posts that national executives or regional organizations with comparable policy scopes publish. Several of the observed patterns suggest a growing professionalization of supranational social media usage. Supranational actors make extensive use of Twitter's multimedia features, engage in cross-posting of social media content, and try to garner attention to their own online resources outside of Twitter. Supranational EU actors are in no way inferior but often better than domestic and international executives on Twitter in this regard. This communicative investment seems to pay off in terms of publicity; at least on the platform itself.

The number of Twitter users subscribing to supranational EU accounts has been growing on average, and in dramatic ways for some. Direct user engagement with supranational messages on the platform is not particularly high in absolute terms, but it by and large corresponds to the engagement rates one can observe for executive messages from national and other regional executives.

Yet, our encompassing description also contains warning signs regarding basic necessary conditions for effective public communication of supranational affairs. Message comprehensibility for the average citizen is hampered by a comparatively high syntactical complexity, unfamiliar vocabulary, and a rather nominal style that may obfuscate political agency in the textual content that supranational actors post on Twitter. This corresponds to a rather technocratic style of communication that has been found in other supranational communication channels. Regarding publicity, we must note that the follower numbers and the engagement rates are hardly equally distributed across supranational communicators. They rather concentrate on a few selected institutional and high-profile individual accounts as well as on a small set of messages in the overall stream of communication. While social media may help supranational actors to circumvent traditional media selection logics, the punctuated publicity patterns we see suggest that also this environment is highly selective in amplifying certain actors and messages.

In sum, our bird's eye view indicates that social media communication is taken very seriously by supranational executives but it still reproduces some of the flaws present in more traditional media as well. Of course, these aggregate patterns can only be a starting point for understanding the nexus of public communication, social media platforms, and popular legitimacy. Whether and how the communication we describe affects the precarious societal legitimacy of supranational decision making requires further analysis. For scholars willing to dig deeper into this type of data, however, the patterns we show provide four points of guidance. First, the sobering findings on textual understandability highlight the need to dissect supranational messages further in terms of the claims that supranational actors make, including their relation to actual political activity. Whether these public messages are mere propaganda or genuine, transparent political accountability reporting would help us understand to what extent public communication contributes to or possibly undermines the popular legitimacy of supranational actors. Second, our qualitative examples for the most engaging tweets highlight variation across externally politicized topics and suggest that topical contents of messages may provide valuable hints on the publicity that supranational messages generate. Third, our findings highlight that especially visual content is part and parcel of supranational public communication on social media, requiring additional forms of content analysis. Fourth and finally, especially the on average clearer communication and higher engagement rates that accounts of individual supranational actors generate highlight that differences between institutionalized and personalized communication on EU affairs can be studied on social media in particular.

Finally, we would like to draw attention to notable pragmatic challenges pertaining to the study of citizen engagement with European politics on social media that we encountered. The first of these is the sheer data volume and the nested structure and variation that comes with it. On the one hand, access to such a rich amount of data, especially from comparatively transparent platforms such as Twitter, allows researchers to study very encompassing populations of messages and communicators, leading to less biased aggregate pictures. On the other hand, managing such large volumes of data entails major logistical problems with regard to storing, sharing, and analyzing the data—especially in a collaborative project. While collaborative coding is tremendously facilitated by services such as our preferred GitHub, such free-of-charge services quickly reach their limits with the amount of data we had to wrangle for the analyses here. With some creativity, these problems can be solved; but for reproducible, collaborative work, political scientists need better infrastructure. The same holds for processing power: With our means, the analyses presented here partially implied waiting for several hours to reshape the data or to summarize descriptive information from it. We also faced a steep learning curve with regard to formulating calls to the Twitter API and handling the comparatively complex and nested data structure it returns. With a view to the large amounts of visual information in the data we present, such technical challenges are likely to increase in the future. Finally, we also should note that, despite the unprecedented access to Twitter data, some notable and substantially important gaps persist especially with a view to study citizen engagement: In our case, we could only extract historical data on follower counts from an external and incomplete source while we were also lacking the number of "impressions" per tweet. Without this information, for example, it is hard to see in how far the on-platform engagement we observe is driven by the messages and their authors or by the algorithms that Twitter uses to show them to specific users on the platform. Yet and still, we hope that our bird's eye view indicates that it is worthwhile to overcome such challenges in future research.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Article

Same Same but Different? Gender Politics and (Trans-)National Value Contestation in Europe on Twitter

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Abstract
The progress achieved in women's rights and gender equality has become the target of a backlash driven by "anti-gender" activists and right-wing populists across EU member states. To a large extent, this conflict takes place in the digital and social media spheres, illustrating the new mediatized logic of value contestation. Therefore, we ask to what extent are the debates about gender equality on Twitter similar in three European countries, and how do users engage in these debates? We examine these questions by collecting Twitter data around the 2021 International Women's Day in Germany, Italy, and Poland. First, we show that the debate remains nationally segmented and is predominantly supportive of gender equality. While citizens engage with the gender equality value online, they do so in a prevailingly acclamatory fashion. In contrast, political and societal actors show higher levels of engagement with the value and receive more interactions on Twitter. Our study highlights the relevance of national contexts to the analysis of (transnational) social media debates and the limited political engagement of citizens on Twitter across Europe. We also critically discuss the strengths and weaknesses of a cross-country social media comparison.

Keywords
gender equality; Germany; international women's day; Italy; Poland; Twitter; value conflicts

Issue
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1. Introduction

The European Union (EU) portrays itself as a "community of values," with gender equality being one of the core elements of such self-image. Over the last two decades, gender mainstreaming and anti-discrimination policies have expanded in the EU and all its member states (Akaliyski et al., 2021; Pollack & Hafner-Burton, 2000). At the same time, the feminist movement gained new ground through online public mobilization. One example is the #MeToo movement that resonated in various countries, creating a heated public debate about sexual assault and the persistent patriarchal character of societal structures. Other gender equality issues highlighted through online campaigns include the gender pay gap as well as increasing awareness that women experience more hate speech and uncivil behaviour on social media than men (Jackson et al., 2020; Willem & Tortajada, 2021). Nevertheless, the backlash against women's rights has also gained traction, with new movements opposed to the so-called "gender ideology" emerging all over Europe. The impacts of such counter-mobilization include bans on academic

programs in gender studies in Hungary, further restriction of abortion rights in Poland, and attacks against feminists growing stronger in many member states (Kaiser, 2020; Righetti, 2021). Hence, gender equality and anti-discrimination policies remain one of the most heavily contested policy areas (Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018; Verloo & Lombardo, 2007).

Against this background, we explore Twitter debates on gender equality in Germany, Italy, and Poland. We ask two main research questions: (a) To what extent are the debates about gender equality on Twitter similar in the three countries? And, further: (b) How do Twitter users engage in these gender equality debates, and to what extent do we observe different interactions, such as likes or retweets, for more or less engaging tweets? To answer the first question on the structure of the Twitter debate, we analyse the co-occurrence of hashtags across the three cases and examine discourse networks in each country. Regarding the second question, we develop a typology of online engagement and investigate these different types in the respective countries and how they intersect with Twitter interactions (retweets, likes, replies, or mentions).

We select Twitter as the platform best suited for public engagement in political debates where pro-gender equality campaigning is likely to converge (e.g., around international hashtags), and opposing views are also likely to find expression. Moreover, due to its character as a rather elite social media network (Stier et al., 2018), public debates of women's rights on Twitter might affect the political sphere because politicians, civil society actors, and other key stakeholders actively follow and engage in these debates. To select a period in which gender equality issues gain public attention, we focused on the days before and after the 2021 International Women's Day (IWD; March 1 to March 10). The IWD constitutes a global public event focused on the fight for women's rights and a more just society for all genders. Institutionalized in 1911, it marks a central date of the women's movement for organizing demonstrations and raising awareness for diverse gender equality-related issues. Since large rallies and marches characteristic of IWD could hardly occur in 2021 due to the Covid-19 pandemic, online mobilization and debates have become even more relevant. Such heightened public attention may provide an opportunity for not only a plurality of individual and collective actors to affirm their support for gender equality but also for "anti-gender" activists to try to reframe the debate. Hence, our study is less concerned with the specificities of the IWD (campaign) and instead utilises this chosen period as a possible impulse for online debates on gender issues.

Our article makes three main contributions. First, we show that Twitter debates on gender issues remain nationally segmented and depict only weak patterns of transnationalization in terms of the topics raised. While the public debates are mainly pro-gender equality, we also illustrate that "anti-gender" discourses can be found across all three online public spheres. Secondly, based on manual coding of the representative sample of randomly selected tweets, we demonstrate that citizens strongly engage in the social media debate during the chosen period, but in a less political and more acclamatory way than political representatives and media actors. Finally, we highlight the Twitter affordances in order to explain that strong public engagement of citizens does not automatically translate into high visibility and reach. In terms of the number of Twitter interactions, Twitter users with an institutional affiliation or celebrities receive more attention than regular citizens.

2. Gender Equality and Citizen Engagement on Social Media

2.1. Feminist Activism on Social Media

Women's rights and feminist issues have become heavily politicized in recent years (Kováts, 2017). The #MeToo movement is perhaps the most powerful example of a successful global feminist mobilization in the digital age. The campaign criticized sexual harassment and assault in the workplace and spotlighted the unequal position of women in public life more broadly. Moreover, many European countries also experienced online and offline mobilization on domestic violence, abortion rights, or traditional gender stereotypes, among other issues. These campaigns raised awareness on the individual instances of injustices and discrimination faced by women. Together, such interventions on social media created social pressure to put different aspects of gender equality on the political agenda (Jackson et al., 2020). Facing fewer organizational barriers while creating safer online spaces for women to share their stories, digital feminist activism has become a central element of gender equality mobilization (Scharff et al., 2016; Willem & Tortajada, 2021). Examples of such "hashtivism" include #MeToo, the German hashtag #Aufschrei on sexual harassment and sexist comments, or the Polish #czarnyprotest that mobilized against the abortion ban (Drüeke & Zobl, 2016; Jackson et al., 2020). Thus, gender and feminist issues mobilize across countries and receive public attention. The IWD as a widely publicized event might enable actors to articulate these issues on Twitter in a condensed period of time.

However, these campaigns and the involved actors also experience severe public and even physical attacks by "anti-gender," right-wing, and religious actors and movements (Kaiser, 2020; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018). They accuse feminists of being "feminazis," degrade pro-gender equality positions as "gender ideology" and use hate speech and transphobic claims in their public communication (Korolczuk & Graff, 2018; Righetti, 2021). Hence, these actors might use the public attention to women's rights created by the IWD to mobilize against gender equality issues in general, verbally attack opponents, or interpret the movement for equal rights among

all genders with conservative frames. Furthermore, in all three countries, right-wing parties represented in parliament or/and the government—Italian Lega and Fratelli d'Italia, the Polish Prawo i Sprawiedliwość (PiS; Law and Justice), and the German Alternative für Deutschland (AfD)—are mounting attacks on what they call "gender ideology." In particular, right-wing actors are highly active on social media platforms. They use these to communicate to their sympathizers directly, circumventing the legacy media and establishing transnational links among right-wing organizations across Europe (Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Knüpfer et al., 2020). In sum and against the backdrop of the IWD as a transnational digital event that brings women's rights to the forefront of the public debate, we expect high visibility of institutionalized actors such as political parties and social movements and activists in all three cases, both defending and opposing gender equality issues.

Concerning issue visibility, we consider the Covid-19 pandemic a strong contextual factor that may lead to the convergence of the Twitter debate in these countries. Women are particularly affected by the health crisis because they work more often than men in the health and service-oriented sectors (e.g., elderly care, education institutions) and thereby have a higher risk of getting infected. Since women also predominantly take over care responsibilities in the family, they experience more (mental and physical) stress at work and home, while men tend to prioritize their paid work and their future in the labour market (Czymara et al., 2021; Zoch et al., 2021). Moreover, recent initiatives to tighten abortion laws in Poland, court convictions of gynaecologists who provide information on abortion in Germany, and the influential role of the Catholic Church in debates on abortion in Italian politics, created attention to women's reproductive rights that might be taken up by various actors in the context of the 2021 IWD. Another issue that is expected to resonate across countries is the persistent unequal pay and women's access to the labour market. Due to the low wages in care-intensive jobs and dominance of part-time employment for women, (female) Twitter users might share their experiences, point out discriminatory work policies, and call for better pay and equal treatment in the labour market. Due to the pandemic circumstances around the IWD 2021, we expect that care and health issues are articulated and receive (transnational) attention on Twitter. Moreover, we expect that abortion and unequal payment are issues that are raised in all three countries.

2.2. Online Engagement

Some scholars argue that with the advent of digital and social media in the late 2000s, the contestation of fundamental values has become more salient in the public sphere. Social media platforms are less regulated in terms of access and spreading information than traditional media sources. Societal and political actors can use these digital channels to shape public opinion and disseminate their ideas—even if this includes illiberal and anti-democratic claims, spreading disinformation, and spurring dissatisfaction with democratic principles (Miller & Vaccari, 2020; Tucker et al., 2017). However, political conflicts and value contestation are not only amplified through social media in a way to gain salience and impact public opinion. The social media platforms also constitute an independent arena of value contestation and activate a variety of actors who engage in value conflicts and use the new digital affordances for political expression and mobilization (Hjarvard et al., 2015). Relying on the literature of social media political engagement (Bossetta et al., 2017; Dahlgren, 2013; Givskov & Trenz, 2014), we can expect that, on the one hand, events such as the IWD are meant as a celebration of values and remembrance of solidarity among women. On the other hand, they are seen as opportunities to express a critique of discrimination and to mobilize for political change.

In particular on Twitter, new forms of hashtag activism have developed to raise awareness and give voice to marginalized (minority) communities (Jackson et al., 2020). Hashtags can be used in an acclamatory way to unite the users in celebration of values or in a politicized way, to position them in support or opposition of values. How these different levels of engagement resonate on Twitter regarding the number of likes, retweets, or replies for more or less engaging tweets is not addressed in previous studies so far (see also de Wilde et al., 2022). In this study, we distinguish between five different levels of engagement on Twitter beyond the use of hashtags and expect users to (a) relate to the value in a celebratory way without explicit reference to its underlying values, responsibilities or solutions; (b) to contribute to the Twitter debate through the sharing of factual information and non-opinionated statements on gender equality; (c) to raise moral arguments with reference to underlying values, to identify cases of discrimination and violation of rights, and to express criticism of the insufficiencies of existing provisions of gender equality; (d) to call for action in support or opposition of values; or (e) to target political opponents in a way that ascribes responsibility for discrimination and violations of gender equality and calls for political change. While we inductively explore the different levels of engagement in our data, we have two expectations on their relationship: There will be fewer tweets that have a higher political engagement level. Moreover, we expect that the higher the engagement level for a tweet, the higher the number of interactions for this tweet.

2.3. Gender Equality in Poland, Germany, and Italy

Previous studies on the women's movements and the contestation of gender issues across Europe point out that the national context powerfully shapes the actor constellation and issue attention in each country (Köttig

et al., 2017; Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018). While our study does not aim to trace the historical legacies of the women's movement or examine changing political cultures in these countries, we consider them as important contextual factors that help us account for national differences.

The EU institutionalized gender equality and created a supranational reference space for these issues in the national politics of member states. However, despite such convergence, most equality norms included in the legally binding EU documents and jurisprudence address rights within the labour market, such as equal access to employment or education (Cichowski, 2013; Wobbe & Biermann, 2009). Women's rights not directly related to non-discrimination are not inscribed in the treaties and therefore cannot be as effectively defended by the EU. Such divergence across the EU member states is perhaps the most striking in terms of reproductive rights. Since these less institutionalized gender issues seem to be the ones that also produce most of the current debates, cultural variation between countries in acceptance of gender equality values and feminist discourse may account for country differences in our analyses.

In our sample, we include two founding EU member states—(West-)Germany and Italy—and one more recent member state, Poland. Based on the Gender Equality Index (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2020), all three countries belong to the lower half of the European distribution in terms of gender equality, yet Germany ranks higher than the other two countries in terms of equal access to political power, education, and labour market. Furthermore, they also have different cultural, political, and feminist traditions. Germany has a strong Protestant background favourable to emancipative values, Italy is predominantly Catholic, and Poland is both Catholic and a post-communist country, which has important implications for country differences in views on gender roles (Akaliyski & Welzel, 2020). Eastern Germany presents a more liminal case: Since the German Democratic Republic (GDR) has been under communist rule, the Eastern part of Germany still shows lower approval of gender equality (Gerhards, 2014).

IWD traditions also differ across these countries. Historically, international impulses have played an important role in feminist mobilization, and the IWD experienced a significant increase in global relevance, such as the UN's decision in 1977 to celebrate March 8 as a day for women's rights and world peace. However, the countries' traditions of IWD celebrations vary. For Germany, the East–West divide still matters in shaping political mobilization. The IWD in the GDR was an official state-led celebration and a holiday since the end of the 1940s. In West Germany, however, it was not until the protests over the abortion paragraph §218 and the left-wing social movements gaining influence at the end of the 1960s that demonstrations on March 8 took place. Recently, new forms of digital feminist activism regarding reproductive rights, equal representation of women, and sexual harassment have gained public attention. Italy was one of the first countries to relaunch March 8 celebrations after World War II, supported by the influential trade union movements and the leftist UDI (Union of Italian Women). This explains an historically high politicization of the feminist and protest movements in their fight against patriarchy and traditional family roles. Recently, domestic violence and the right to abortion became crucial issues in the Italian women's movement Non Una di Meno and the IWD in particular. The Polish legacy of the IWD shares the historical experience of the GDR in terms of the relatively apolitical communist state-celebration of this day. Under communism, giving flowers and small gifts to women had become a prevalent manner of celebrating March 8, accompanied by official praise of women in the workforce. Currently, the day is largely devoid of such influence and constitutes a more generic celebration of women in general and, often, of traditional femininity. At the same time, the IWD is also celebrated as Women's Rights' Day in Poland. The country has seen a recent rise in women's political mobilization in defence of their rights due to the government's intent to further limit abortion rights on September 2016. A prominent example is the feminist social movement Ogólnopolski Strajk Kobiet (Polish Women's Strike). Thus, the IWD 2021 has also been marked by marches against the limitation of abortion rights.

Given these country differences, the selected cases allow us to formulate the following expectations regarding their relevance for the citizens' engagement in online debates on gender equality. In Poland, we expect to see the lowest level of engagement in the public due to the apolitical women's movement tradition and comparatively lower societal support for gender equality. Only political actors or activists would be more engaged around anti-gender or reproductive rights' issues. In Italy, the vivid protest culture and recent feminist mobilization might engage more people than in Poland, mainly around the issues of domestic violence and abortion rights. But, yet again, the public will probably be less engaged in the conversation, with political and societal actors taking the lead. Germany might show the highest level of engagement for gender equality on Twitter. While feminist issues in Germany are not strongly politicized, the public support for gender equality is high. Thus, if people publicly engage on Twitter, they might be the ones who truly care about gender equality and may also express criticism or demands. In the German case, we, therefore, expect that various gender equality issues gain similar attention on Twitter.

3. Collecting and Analysing Twitter Data in Three Countries

The analysis of national Twitter debates aims to capture country-specific discourses for comparative purposes. Collecting Twitter data is per se a transnational and predominantly English language-oriented endeavour, which

is why previous studies have looked at widely shared English hashtags (#MeToo or #RefugeesWelcome) or hashtags with an inherent transnational scope such as #TTIP or #climatechange (Knüpfer et al., 2020; Ruiz-Soler, 2020; Schünemann, 2020). Thus, by selecting the period around the IWD, we look at a transnational event that favours the appearance of gender equality issues on Twitter which might nonetheless be framed according to national politics and political culture in Germany, Italy, and Poland.

A recurrent challenge of collecting tweets for comparative analysis is that we cannot rely on English-language terms and instead need multilingual terms in German, Italian, and Polish. Besides consulting the relevant literature on the women's movement and anti-gender campaigns (among others Kuhar & Paternotte, 2018), this required the authors, who are fluent in the languages of our three country cases, to manually search for hashtags and keywords frequently employed in gender equality tweets in their respective countries, along with several translations of common phrases related to "equal rights," "feminism," and "gender ideology" (see the Supplementary File for the full list of keywords). We employ keywords in national languages rather than hashtags to collect the data because they allow us to identify a broad set of tweets and actors. While hashtags are widely used for social media data collection and analysis, their usage implies a certain level of digital literacy because it is considered "a digital linguistic practice" (Heyd & Puschmann, 2017, p. 5) and an intentional act to link the tweet to a broader public debate on a certain issue. However, Twitter users—in particular non-institutionalized actors—might share their views on gender equality issues without using the official announced IWD hashtags (#IWD2021; #ChooseToChallenge) or hashtags at all. The use of geo-location filters for country-specific sampling is equally problematic as only a minority of users add locations to their tweets (Schünemann, 2020). Hence, we built a search query on the Twitter v2 API to collect the data without a geo-location filter as well as using important hashtags—without the hashtag symbol—and country-specific keywords associated with the main IWD event and gender equality during the period of March 1 to March 10, 2021. After collecting the data, we semi-automatically discarded duplicates. Based on given location information in the Twitter user's bio (wherever provided), we deleted tweets that did not belong to the German, Polish, or Italian context (i.e., tweets from Austria in German language). In total, we collected 52,785 tweets (17,007 German, 22,913 Italian, and 12,865 Polish).

Figure 1 provides an overview of our data. The trajectories are comparable across countries, with a short period of warm-up and mobilization culminating on the IWD on March 8. The following day shows post-IWD tweets in the three countries, but the number of tweets drops significantly. The number of tweets from Italy is almost consistently higher than in the two other cases, while Poland shows the lowest number of tweets in this period (see Table A1 in the Supplementary File for tweet volume per day in each country).

In order to answer our questions on the structure of the Twitter debates and the levels of engagement, we

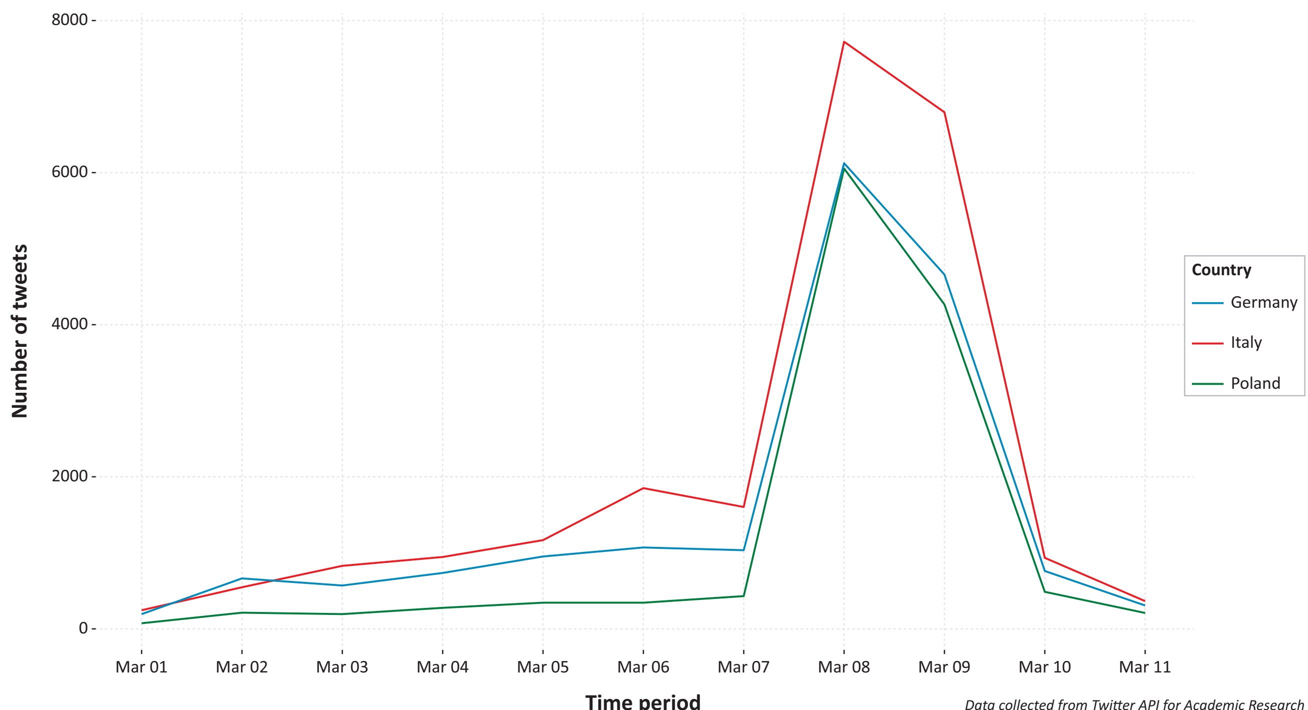

Figure 1. Number of German, Italian, and Polish tweets (March 1 to March 10, 2021). Note: Number of tweets = 52,785 (17,007 German, 22,913 Italian, and 12,865 Polish).

use various measures. First, we rely on co-occurrence analysis of hashtags (a pair of hashtags appearing together in a single tweet) to identify which topics on gender equality have the most resonance around IWD and whether there exists any transnational linkage. Looking for transnational patterns in retweets to establish convergence or divergence in issue salience has been rare outside English tweets due to language, geographical, and socio-political variation among countries (Froio & Ganesh, 2019; Ruiz-Soler, 2020). Therefore, we check for similarities or dissimilarities through a co-occurring hashtag network that allows for a more robust comparative analysis, looking for common patterns in discourses rather than retweets' metadata. Out of the 52,785 total tweets, 20,462 (39%) contained 18,555 unique hashtags, with an average of 2.87 hashtags per tweet. Our extraction of these tweets with the R package quanteda (Benoit et al., 2018) showed that 46% were German, 42% Italian, and 12% were Polish.

Using the 30 most frequently occurring hashtag pairs (see Table A5 in the Supplementary File for the complete list), we construct a co-occurrence network, whose nodes are represented by the hashtags, and the weighted edges between them are set according to the frequency of the co-occurrence of two hashtags in unique tweets. The betweenness centrality measure is applied to scale the size of the nodes, with larger nodes representing higher values. In our case, betweenness centrality is useful for identifying those hashtags that lie on the shortest path connecting two other hashtags. That tells us which topics act as bridges connecting two otherwise disparate topics. A node (hashtag) with high betweenness centrality has a large outreach on the network since it effectively connects different network regions. The official IWD hashtags will likely have large centralities in this case, but the use of these hashtags with other gender equality hashtags can reveal how the Twitter users in the three different national contexts tweet about this value. We used the software Gephi (Bastian et al., 2009) to build the network and detect communities of hashtags. Gephi's Louvain clustering algorithm (Blondel et al., 2008) detects smaller communities within the larger network, with higher modularity scores indicating denser clusters. Nodes (hashtags) clustered within smaller communities have more information flows between them than their flows with nodes outside the communities.

Next, we took a random sample of 2% of all tweets per country and coded them manually (341 German, 459 Italian, and 267 Polish tweets). These samples guarantee reliable results (at the 0.05 margin of error and 90% to 96% confidence intervals). Our codebook (in the Supplementary File) captures five main categories: level of engagement, position (pro, neutral, or contra-gender equality), actor type (individual or collective), actor affiliation, and issue (up to three issues to be selected from an open list). The unit of analysis is a single tweet. Coding was developed by five trained coders in their native languages. After three rounds of coder training (with English language tweets from Ireland) and several adaptations to the codebook to accomplish an intersubjective understanding of the codes, we reached intercoder reliability across the coded categories of 0.76 (Fleiss' Kappa) with the lowest score of 0.64 for levels of engagement and the highest of 0.88 for actors. While we see these results as satisfactory, we expect that the reliability may be higher in the country-specific datasets due to the better knowledge of the coders of each national context. Tables A8 to A15 in the Supplementary File summarize the data for each country case and the main code categories.

We apply the discourse network methodology (Leifeld & Haunss, 2012; Wallaschek et al., 2020) to the manually coded tweets' dataset. Our objective is to examine how actors and issues are linked in the three Twitter debates and whether there are any discursive patterns across the different national contexts. This method was predominantly developed to examine policy discourses in newspaper articles and policy documents by identifying ideational linkages and discourse coalitions (Leifeld, 2016), while the analysis of social media discourse networks has only recently received scholarly attention (Bossner & Nagel, 2020). For each country, we use a two-mode network structure, consisting of actors (political, societal, economic, media, influencer, citizen, and other), the issues they raised, and the position they hold on these issues. We use betweenness centrality as a measure to identify those nodes, i.e., actors and issues that link different sub-discourses on gender equality and guide the flow of information via their existence as influential bridges. In two-mode networks such as ours, betweenness centrality is the function of paths from actors to actors, from actors to issues (or issues to actors), and from issues to issues with the scores implying a certain exclusivity of an actor or an issue, since a node is only central as long as it is the only node in its vertex-set (Borgatti & Everett, 1997, p. 256).

4. Results

The following section is structured along our two research questions and formulated expectations in Section 2. First, we look at the co-occurring hashtags in the overall Twitter discourse on gender equality in three countries to investigate transnational linkages. Second, based on the coded sample data, we present discourse networks of actors and issues in three countries to provide a more in-depth look at the debate on gender equality. Finally, we show the levels of engagement and how they differ regarding the interactions.

4.1. Co-Occurring Hashtags in Nationally Segmented Twitter Debates

To establish how issues on gender equality relate to each other, we examine the co-occurrences between a pair of hashtags. Figure 2 shows the co-occurrence

Figure 2. Co-occurrence network of top 30 hashtags from Germany, Italy, and Poland. Notes: Node size is based on betweenness centrality; blue indicates the German hashtag cluster, while green and red show the Italian and Polish hashtag clusters, respectively; the network is based on the Force Atlas layout algorithm in Gephi.

patterns between the most frequently used hashtags during the mobilization period of March 1 to March 10, 2021. Twitter debates on IWD remain nationally segmented: The applied modularity measure (Modularity score: 0.306) detected three communities of hashtags: German, Italian, and Polish clusters (Table A5 and A6 in the Supplementary File summarize the centrality scores and community structure of the hashtags). English campaign hashtags provide important linkages between the national clusters of German (blue), Italian (green), and Polish (red) hashtags. The main campaign hashtags #iwd2021 and #internationalwomensday reported the highest betweenness centrality of 36.05 and 32.94 (for all scores, see Table A6 in the Supplementary File). Yet, except for these popular hashtags, there is a substantial variation in how users in the three countries employ hashtags to tweet on gender equality and the IWD.

In Germany, users link the international IWD hashtags to value-oriented hashtags such as #gleichberechtigung (equal rights), #feministischerkampftag (feminist day of struggle), or #frauenpower (women's power). In Italy, IWD hashtags are employed less diversely and predominantly focus on the event itself. The use of the hashtag #festadelladonna (#celebratingwomanday) gives voice to those women who complain about a mere celebratory activity on this day and reclaim it to fight for women's rights. Moreover, in the Italian case, IWD is linked to Covid-19 hashtags (#covid19, #coronavirus), highlighting the pandemic's impact in Italy. In Poland, the use of hashtags on gender equality with hashtags of IWD campaign is the lowest when compared to Germany and Italy, and remains primarily limited to linking celebratory hashtags such as #dzieńkobiet (women's day) with #iwd2021 or #internationalwomensday. This indicates that on this strategic event, IWD tweets in Germany and Italy were more likely to co-occur with hashtags on equal rights, health, and feminism, while this trend was missing in Poland, where IWD hashtags tended to co-occur with acclamatory hashtags.

4.2. Discourse Networks in Germany, Italy, and Poland

To better understand which actors raise what types of issues related to gender equality and IWD, we look at the weighted two-mode networks of actors and issues. Figures 3, 4, and 5 show that, overall, users in all three countries tweeted in support of gender equality indicated by the prominent green edges running from actors to issues. The most central actors in all three countries were citizens (betweenness centrality scores for all nodes in the networks in Table A7 in the Supplementary File). This implies that citizens are the main connectors between different issues and, thus, have a large influence in the flow of the discourse on gender equality, followed by political, economic, and media actors. Therefore, our expectation that institutionalized actors would occupy the most central positions is not supported. Moreover, the high centrality of citizens in all

three cases challenges the typical perception of Twitter as an "elite social media network" to some extent. However, the number of issues raised (issue nodes in blue) by the six types of actors (actor nodes in orange) varied considerably in the three networks, with German actors tweeting about 30 different issues, followed by Italian and Polish actors who tweeted on 21 and 20 different issues, respectively.

As illustrated by the dense network of issues and actors (Figure 3, Density: 0.16), the German discourse predominantly engages positively with various gender equality issues. The core themes are equal rights, empowerment, feminism, and patriarchy, used by various actors, while issues such as abortion rights, health and care, or hate speech remain at the periphery. Citizens remain rather acclamatory by tweeting "Happy international women's day" without reference to values or issues, which indicates an apolitical engagement among ordinary people. German political actors campaigned more actively to support gender equality issues such as equal pay or feminism—compared to political actors in Italy and Poland—while also opposing LGBTQI* rights and employing the conservative narrative of "gender ideology." For instance, a local AfD politician criticized the diversity policies of the governing coalition in Hamburg, calling it "rot-grüne Genderwahn" (red-green gender mania). Going against our expectation, abortion rights and healthcare issues fail to attract much mobilization, but equal pay, as expected, is raised by citizens, economic, media, and political actors alike.

Despite the highest number of tweets during the entire period, the Italian network (Figure 4, Density: 0.19) is less varied in terms of contested issues than the German network but more active than the Polish network. Citizens tweet largely in support of the general themes of equal rights and feminism, but as other Italian actors, all engage in a rather celebratory way without referring to any specific issue. Interestingly, only citizens and influencers seem to oppose gender equality in their tweets by employing the "gender ideology" narrative and traditional gender roles stereotypes; other actors in the Italian network remain supportive or stay neutral to gender equality. Media and economic actors in Italy engage quite strongly in the Twitter debate, but as citizens, they seem more reluctant in propagating the value of gender equality and often display only low engagement in a celebratory way. When they engage beyond acclamation, they support equal rights or criticize domestic violence in their tweets. Moreover, and as in the German case, abortion rights and healthcare issues fail to gain the spotlight, but the issue of equal pay invites supporting tweets from economic, media, and to a certain extent, political actors.

The most loosely connected network is that of Polish actors and issues (Figure 5, Density: 0.15). Again, citizens are the most influential nodes of the network.

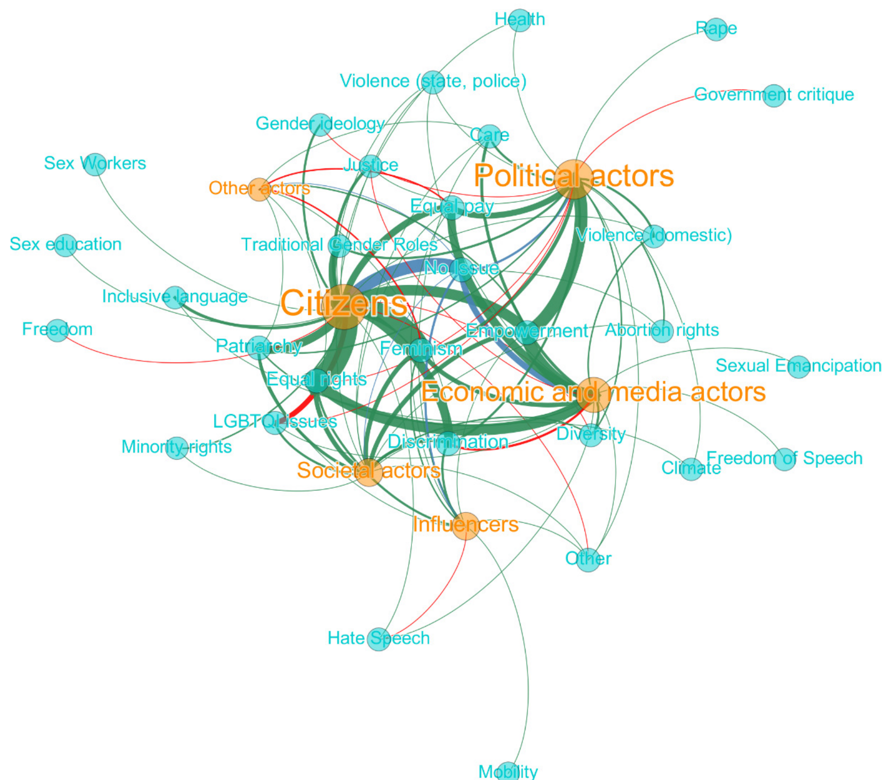

Figure 3. Issue-actor network of tweets from coded German sample. Note: The bipartite graph depicts two nodes—issues (blue) and actors (orange)—and the relationship between them through the weighted edges with different position stands (Pro: Green, Neutral: Dark Blue, Contra: Red).

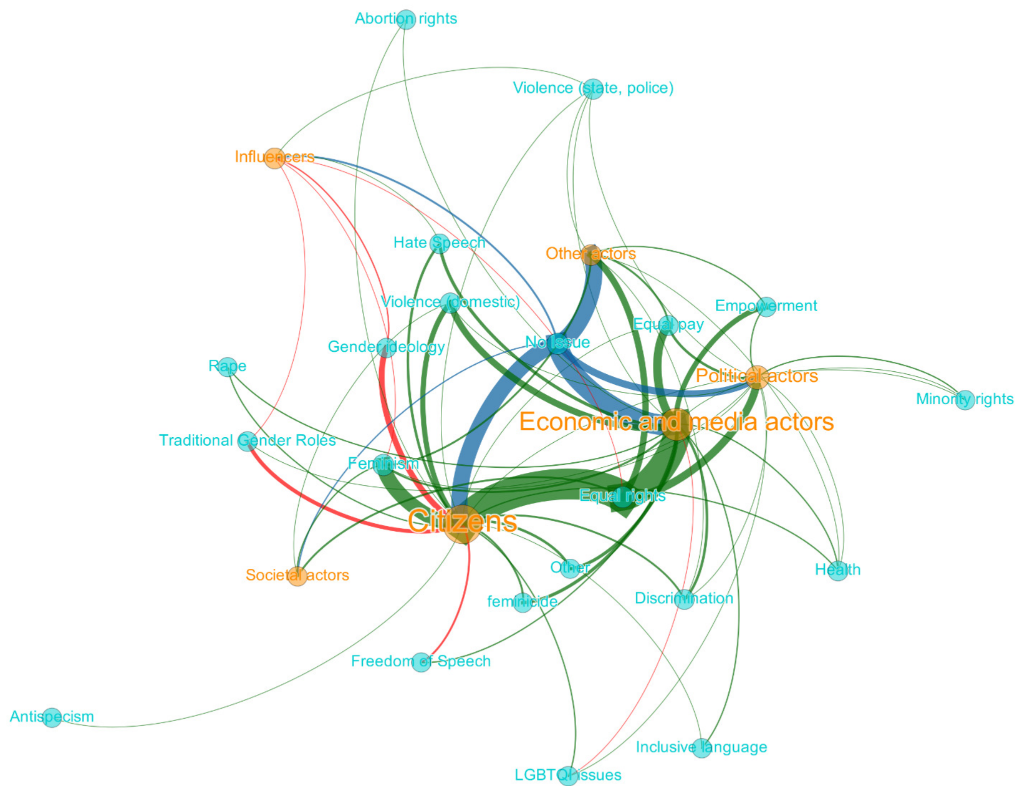

Figure 4. Issue-actor network of tweets from Italy. Same graph description as in Figure 3.

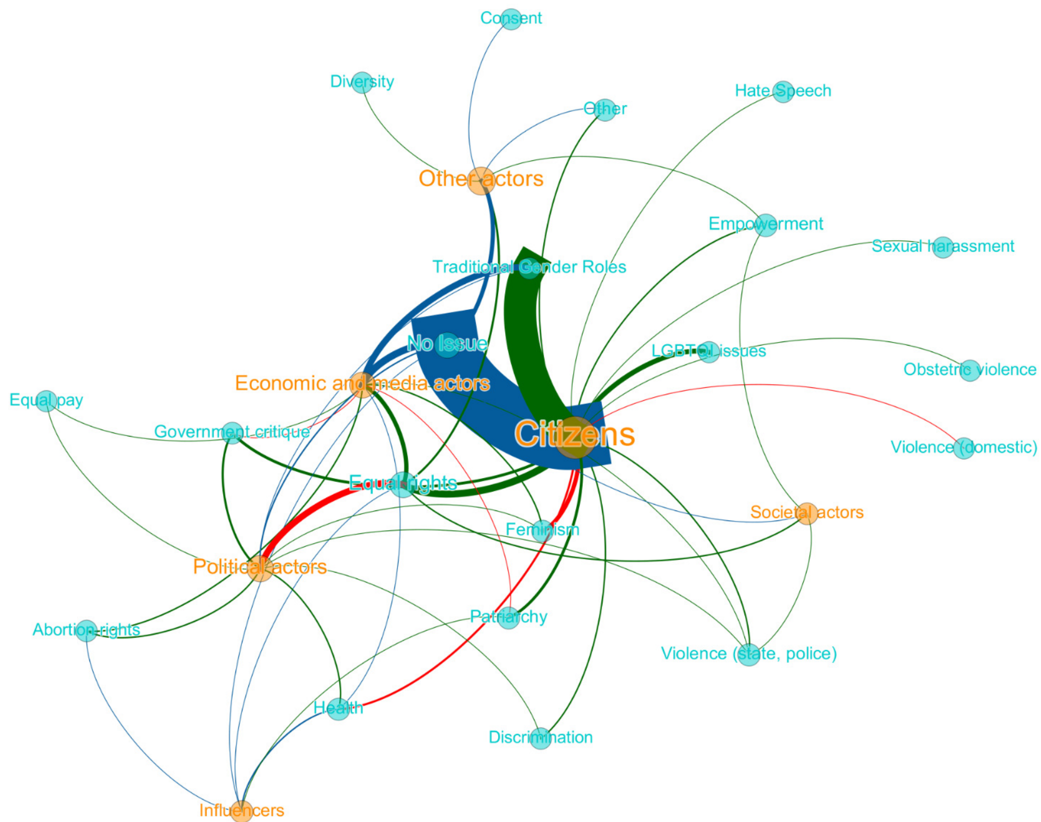

Figure 5. Issue-actor network of tweets from Poland. Same graph description as in Figure 3.

However, they are less likely to tweet about any particular issue. Instead, they primarily post celebratory tweets on the occasion of women's day, offering generic praise of women and frequently mentioning giving or receiving traditional flowers, visualized by the two thickest edges between citizens and "no issues" and citizens and "traditional gender roles." Moreover, political, economic, media, and other societal actors also refrain from participating actively in the discourse on women's rights. When they do, they either remain neutral or post generically supporting "equal rights" tweets. Despite the controversial judicial decision that implied an effective ban on abortion rights in 2020 and organized demonstrations in the streets of major cities on March 8, 2021, the citizens, societal, and political actors in our sample hardly tweeted about the issue of gender equality. Against our expectations, equal pay and healthcare issues also fail to mobilize actors in the discourse network. Positive mentions of LGBTQI* issues by citizens highlight the contrast between the government-led campaign against LGBTQI* rights, absent in our analysis, and the citizen's discourse.

In all three cases, a transnational pattern against the value of gender equality emerged on the two issues of feminism and "gender ideology." Actors who tweeted against the value employed the narrative of gender ideology to criticize or undermine the feminist movement. However, in Germany, it was either far-right politicians or far-right actors at the periphery of the network who attacked feminism by holding a conservative understanding of the feminist movement and questioning the diversity of opinions on feminism and gender. In Italy and Poland, on the other hand, citizens engaged against the value of gender equality by employing anti-gender discourse or stereotypical frames.

4.3. Levels of Engagement on Twitter

We now turn to the level of engagement in the three countries based on the manual coding of the tweets. Low engagement levels prevail in the collected tweets (Germany: 29.9%; Italy: 32.4%; Poland: 66.6% of our sample; see Table A11 in the Supplementary File). The Polish debate, in particular, shows a strong tendency towards an apolitical perception of this day which might be a legacy of the former communist state-led celebrations on March 8. Underlined is this weak politicization of the IWD when we look at the number of tweets that highly engage with gender equality. The highest level of engagement was identified in only 3.1% of all Polish tweets, while the German case shows 7.3%. Hence, our expectations on the different levels of engagement in our three countries—Poland showing the lowest, and Germany the highest levels of engagement—are generally supported.

The low level of engagement in the tweets also affects how users interact with them. In Figure 6, we compare the levels of engagement with the average response to a tweet regarding the number of likes, quotes, replies, and retweets. It shows that receiving likes is the most common engagement from users with a tweet in all three cases, but also the one that creates the least public attention. Quoting or retweeting other tweets increases the audience to this particular tweet, while liking a tweet

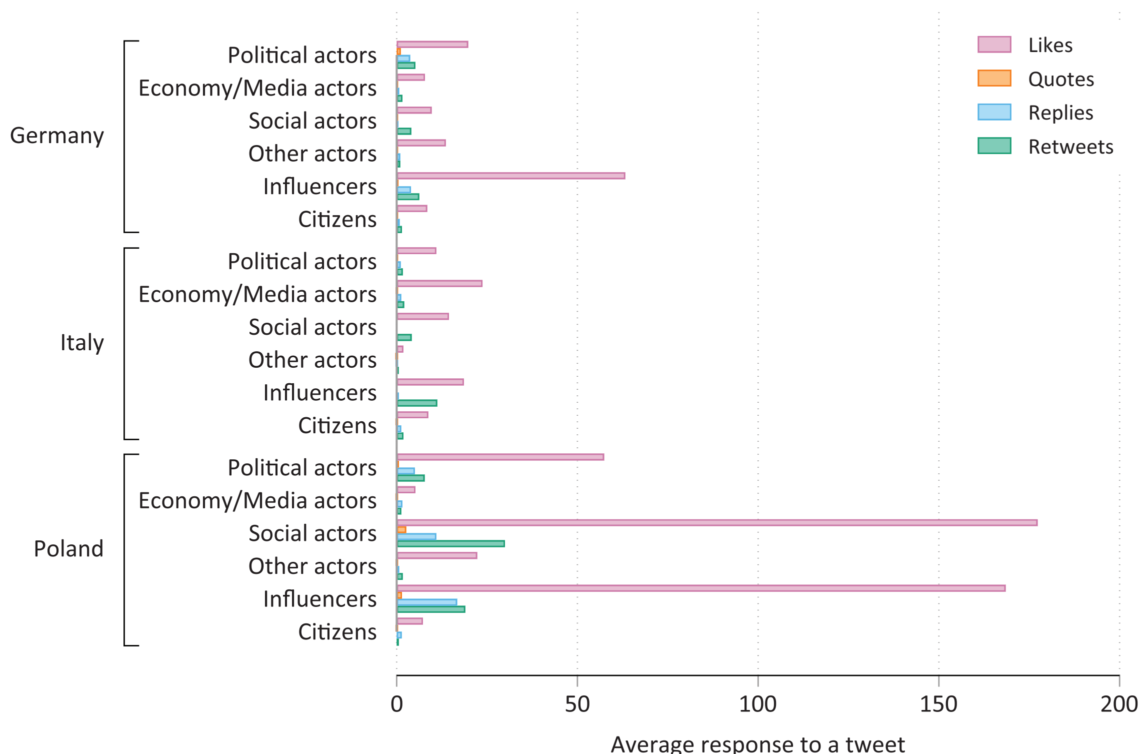

Figure 6. Levels of engagement and Twitter interactions of the audience across the three cases.

might depend on the Twitter algorithm which structures the timeline of your follower and whether they can see what the user liked. The most valuable finding is that, on average, a higher level of political engagement creates more retweets and replies than less politically engaged tweets. Such highly engaging tweets contain criticism, calls for action, and demands of certain rights. These tweets may then lead to support (most probably as likes or retweets) or contestation by other users.

The previous two-mode networks demonstrated that political and societal actors tweet about various gender equality-related issues. On average, those tweets also receive a lot of attention—particularly in the Polish case (see Figure 7). In contrast, citizens are rather active on Twitter but hardly interacting with other Twitter users. Also noteworthy is that social media influencers, celebrities, and bloggers receive many interactions, especially in terms of likes and retweets, despite their relatively marginal appearance in the three networks. In Poland, social actors, and in Italy economic and media actors also get a comparable amount of attention. Hence, there seems to be a hierarchy of attention, with prominent actors reaching out with a few tweets while the main bulk of the debate carried out by citizens remains rather unresponded to.

5. Conclusion

The article analyses the public Twitter debate on the value of gender equality in Germany, Italy, and Poland during the IWD mobilization of March 2021. On the one hand, we look at how a core democratic value—gender equality—is discussed in social media, by whom, and to what extent we identify similar online debates in the three countries. On the other hand, we examine how different actors and citizens, in particular, engage in such social media debates. In addition, the article explores the possibilities and limitations of a multi-method approach and cross-country social media comparison.

Three main results stand out. First, the online mobilization on IWD is rather weakly transnationalized. The national Twitter discourses are segmented and mainly linked by the official English campaigning hashtags such as #iwd2021 or #internationalwomensday. Our cases also differ in their engagement level and positioning on issues: While the German Twitter public was the most politically engaged and supportive of gender equality, most Polish tweets were acclamatory and indifferent to the value. Moreover, there is only a weak similarity of issue attention across the three cases. Tweets in support of equal rights for women and raising feminist issues (in Germany and Italy) resonate most strongly across the countries. Interestingly, there are no issue references to the EU or the European policies in our sample, underlining the nationally segmented Twitter discourse structure.

Second, the most striking similarity across the cases is that citizens engage heavily on Twitter. Regarding equal rights, they focus on the apolitical and celebratory aspects of IWD and less on specific issues (this is most pronounced in Polish Twitter). Similarly, those who marginally contest the value do so in a mocking or dismissive manner of attacking feminism and employing

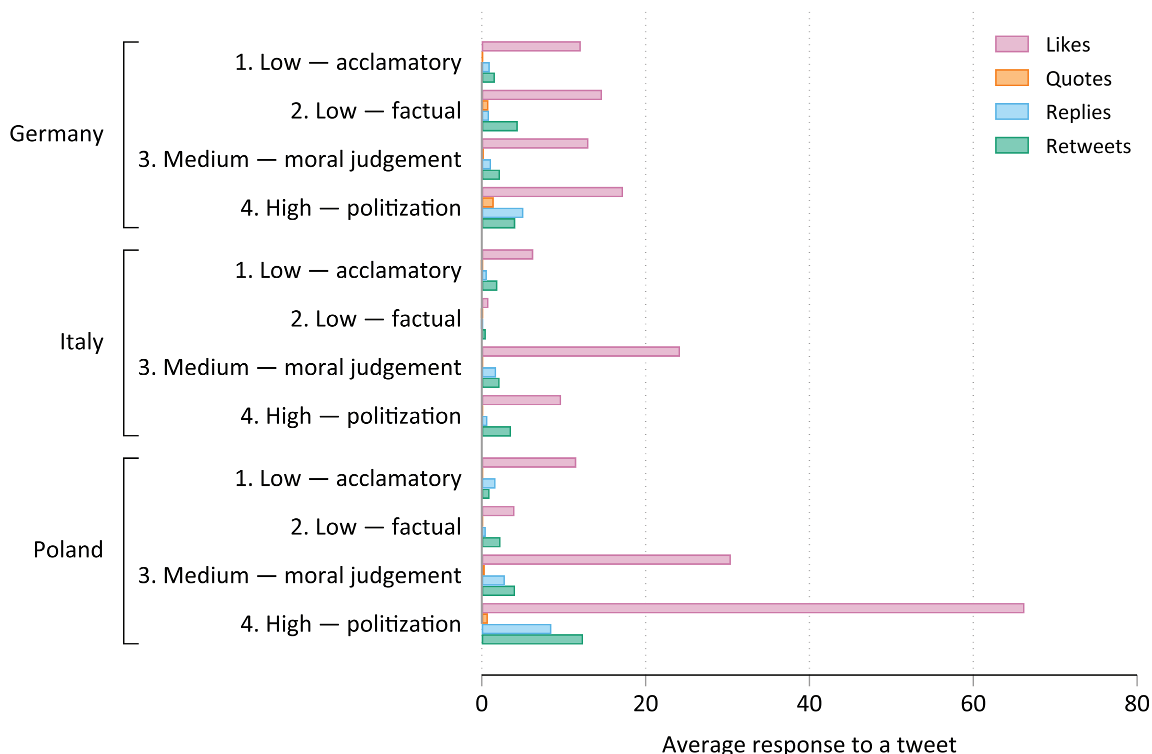

Figure 7. Levels of Twitter audience interactions by actor type in each country.

"gender ideology" frames, instead of raising debates on specific issues. Institutionalized actors tweet about gender equality-related issues with a more moral and political stance, criticizing discriminatory practices and demanding gender policy reforms.

Third, Twitter interactions reflect differences in the levels of engagement between the actors. While citizens are strongly represented in the actor-issue networks, their tweets get fewer reactions than tweets from institutional actors. The main explanation is the stark difference in numbers of followers between citizens and institutional actors which in turn creates more visibility for tweets and leads to more reactions. The high number of Twitter reactions for influencers and celebrities stands in contrast to their less central position in the actor-issue networks. This confirms previous studies on the elite structure of social media and that only a few Twitter users are very visible in public and create (issue) attention. In this sense, our findings resemble, to some extent, results from studies of the offline public sphere, which demonstrate that political and societal actors set the public agenda. A minor additional explanation might be that many tweets from citizens that we captured with our keyword-oriented data collection are not intended to mobilize and create attention for the overall IWD campaign. This points towards different uses and engagements of Twitter users that should be further explored.

Our multi-method and cross-country approach to social media demonstrates advantages in how to examine social media data. The research design employs quantitative hashtag analysis and qualitative coding as well as discourse network methodology and content analysis. The first combination allows for a broader transnational as well as an in-depth look into national social media use patterns; the second reveals discrepancy of actors' centralities in discourse network and their influence on social media in terms of engagement and Twitter interactions. The comparative social media research design enables us to look beyond a single country or hashtag. Instead, we use country-specific keywords and hashtags that capture a broader spectrum of the debates and allow a more context-sensitive approach towards the analysis on social media platforms. In this way, we are able to study national social media discourses outside the US and English-speaking countries and capture political engagement by citizens that goes beyond the (professional) use of hashtags by NGOs and political parties.

However, this approach relied heavily on the knowledge of the national contexts by the authors. The data collection and coding of the text material were also very time-consuming. The relevant keywords had to be identified for each national context and an intersubjective meaning of the different code categories had to be established to assure valid results, especially as applied to the often relatively short tweets. In this regard, studying national social media discourses poses some methodological limitations. One such obstacle was the country selection, strongly affected by the size and primary language of the country. A small post-communist country, Lithuania, was included in our initial proposal for this study, but the Twitter debate on the IWD 2021 in Lithuanian was very marginal and made it impossible to analyse. At the same time, selecting Ireland or Spain as potential interesting cases created data collection problems due to their national languages being spoken in multiple countries, and using a geo-location filter only for those countries would have questioned the data comparability. Thus, whilst our main finding stresses the importance of national context for social media debates and questions the assumption of their transnationalization, collecting cross-country social media data remains a challenge.

Future studies should nonetheless explore this methodological task by comparing different data collection strategies for cross-country comparisons in order to systematically analyse country differences as well as examine the transnationalization hypothesis. Additionally, it might be worth analysing how democratic values such as gender equality resonate across social media platforms and to what extent citizens might engage on these platforms differently. More research might also be needed to explore other important factors involved in gender equality discourse on Twitter, such as gender or specific political/social affiliation of the Twitter users. We decided not to imply either the former or the latter from the user profiles, especially in such ethically sensitive subject matter as the actor's gender identity. Political orientation was also not always explicitly stated and would have questioned the validity of our coding.

In comparison to previous studies on anti-gender campaigns in Europe, our findings show a relatively positive (or at least neutral) tone of online debates on gender equality. This might also be a result of the time framework around IWD, probably a rather favourable context to express support for gender equality. However, the high number of tweets—especially from citizens—which express indifference to the value and issue shows that the IWD is rather understood as an apolitical event with low mobilization potential.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Article

At the Digital Margins? A Theoretical Examination of Social Media Engagement Using Intersectional Feminism

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Abstract
This article applies an intersectional feminist lens to social media engagement with European politics. Disproportionately targeted at already marginalised people, the problem of online abuse/harassment has come to increasing public awareness. At the same time, movements such as #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo have demonstrated the value of social media in facilitating global grassroots activism that challenges dominant structures of power. While the literature on social media engagement with European politics has offered important insights into the extent to which social media facilitates democratic participation, it has not to date sufficiently accounted for patterns of intersectional activism and online inequalities. Using Nancy Fraser's feminist critique of Habermas' public sphere theory and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality, this article explores patterns of gender and racial inequalities in the digital public space. By analysing both the role of racist and misogynistic online abuse targeted at women, nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people in public life, as well as the opportunities for marginalised groups to mobilise transnationally through subaltern counter-publics, I argue that social media engagement is inextricably linked with offline inequalities. To fully understand the impact of social media on European democracy, we need to pay attention to gendered and racialised dynamics of power within the digital public sphere that have unequal consequences for democratic participation. This will involve expanding our methodological repertoire and employing tools underpinned by a critical feminist epistemology.

Keywords
Brexit; digital activism; European public sphere; feminism; intersectionality; online harassment; online violence; populist radical right; social media; transphobia

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1. Introduction

In this article, I outline a research agenda for an intersectional feminist approach to social media engagement with European politics. This approach offers an account of the way in which social media engagement in Europe is shaped by gender and race as structures of power. These structures reduce opportunities for democratic participation in the digital public sphere for women, nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people, with particular impacts on those of colour, or trans or queer women. In their report on *Toxic Twitter*, Amnesty International (2018) noted that social media abuse is disproportionately targeted towards women, especially women of colour, and is often triggered when sharing opinions about highly politicised topics such as the EU, gender, and race. Amnesty International and the United Nations have recognised online abuse as a human rights violation, linking it with freedoms of expression, assembly, and association that are supposed to be guaranteed with democratic citizenship (Amnesty International, 2018). The European Institute for Gender Equality has argued that cyber violence against women and girls needs to be understood as a form of gender-based violence and

addressed at an EU level (European Institute for Gender Equality, 2017).

My starting point for this article is that, despite increasing public attention to the role of social media platforms in facilitating online abuse, mainstream scholarship on this topic has largely overlooked such patterns of gender inequality in the digital sphere, stemming from a lack of engagement with feminist theory. Following Nicola J. Smith and Donna Lee, theories of gender and sexuality have been "written out" of political science compared with other social sciences disciplines (Smith & Lee, 2015, p. 50; see also Kantola & Lombardo, 2017). Within EU studies, feminist scholars have observed not just the way in which the field renders invisible "the perspectives and experiences of anyone other than White cisgender men" (Guerrina et al., 2018, p. 254), but also the way in which it shapes and reifies political and social hierarchies. Social media scholars have recognised the possibility of exclusion and "uncivil" behaviour as well as the challenges of online filter bubbles for democratic legitimacy. At the same time, they have also analysed the new and inclusive opportunities for transnational democratic engagement with European politics afforded by social media platforms (see e.g., Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Bossetta et al., 2018; Brändle et al., 2021; Roose et al., 2017). Yet, these challenges and opportunities of social media are generally discussed in isolation from the gendered and racialised structures of power that underpin them. A feminist approach, then, aims to "challenge strategic silences" in mainstream analysis of social media engagement that "keep traditionally marginal groups…on the periphery" of European politics (Guerrina et al., 2018, p. 254).

Feminist analysis can, however, bring with it its own exclusions (Kantola & Lombardo, 2017, p. 335). Intersectionality is an approach that highlights the multiple oppressions faced by women of colour. In elucidating her concept of intersectionality, Kimberlé Crenshaw argues that Black women have been "theoretically erased" in the conceptualisation of oppression within "single-axis frameworks" of either gender, race, or class (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139). While the term originated in Black feminist US legal scholarship in the late 1980s, it describes, as Moya Bailey notes, "a concept that Black feminists have discussed since our earliest preserved writings, speeches, and poetry" (Bailey, 2021). The problem of racist and xenophobic online hate speech has started to be addressed at an international level: In 2016 the EU, for example, introduced a Code of Conduct on Countering Illegal Hate Speech Online (European Commission, 2016) that was agreed with major social media companies. Intersectionality, however, acknowledges the differences not just between but also within groups, drawing attention to the experiences of women and nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people of colour who do not just experience racism and sexism simultaneously, but a combination of oppressions that is greater than the sum of its parts (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 140). In more recent scholarship, intersectionality has been expanded to encompass a wider range of categories such as sexuality, religion, ethnicity, and ability that are, according to Patricia Hill Collins, "best understood in relational terms rather than in isolation from one another" (Collins, 2015, p. 14). Despite a wide range of intersectional studies from the US context and feminist cultural and media studies (see e.g., Brown et al., 2017; Jane, 2014; Kanai & McGrane, 2020; Sobande, 2020), literature on social media engagement with European politics has skimmed over the topic of intersectional experiences of social media.

To understand the conditions under which citizens engage in European politics on social media, we therefore need to consider the online experiences of already marginalised groups, and their wider consequences for European democracy. I argue that this task has several dimensions: (a) engaging with feminist critiques of public sphere theory; (b) applying intersectional theory to consider inclusiveness not just in terms of transnational communication but also gender, racial, and sexual diversity; and (c) considering the online sphere as inextricably linked to the offline sphere. To do this I draw on both Nancy Fraser's feminist critique of Habermas' public sphere theory (Fraser, 1992) and Kimberlé Crenshaw's theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989, 1991). I then explore two key themes: online abuse as "participatory inequality" and "subaltern counter-publics" as potential spaces of resistance using empirical examples primarily from the UK and Germany. These examples relate to EU/Brexit debates as well as broader transnational issues that are likely to appear simultaneously across European national public spheres (Bossetta et al., 2017, p. 71). I argue that, in order to fully understand the opportunities and challenges arising from social media for democracy, an intersectional approach to citizens' engagement is required that pays attention to gendered and racialised dynamics of power within the digital public sphere that have unequal consequences.

Some brief content notes: Firstly, I cite examples of misogynistic and racist abuse directed at women in European public life. Taking on board Emma A. Jane's argument that there has been a "tyranny of silence" within academic literature about the sexually violent discourse directed at individuals on social media (Jane, 2014, p. 533), I provide uncensored quotes. While these may be shocking to read, I am quoting messages purposefully cited by the recipients themselves. In so doing I hope that I have honoured the agency of these women who have spoken publicly about their experiences of online abuse. Secondly, in line with intersectional feminism's recognition of difference, I seek to avoid a reification of the binary gender categories of "woman" and "man." In this article, I have adopted Moya Bailey's phrase of "women, nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant folks" (Bailey, 2021) to recognise that not only women experience gender-based oppression but also anyone who falls outside the dominant gender binary.

2. Social Media Engagement and Intersectional Feminist Theory

2.1. Social Media and European Democracy

There is a wide literature on social media engagement with European/EU politics that has contributed important, in-depth analyses of the impact of social media on European democracy. Yet, few studies explicitly theorise the way in which gender and race shape this engagement. Resting upon normative theories of the public sphere (Habermas, 1984, 1999), social media is conceptualised as a digital public sphere that now plays a key role in transnational democratic participation in European politics (see e.g., Barisione & Michailidou, 2017; Michailidou et al., 2014). Mauro Barisione and Asimina Michailidou, for example, see social media "both as a public space for opinion expression and formation and as a resource for citizen mobilisation and collective action" (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017, p. 8). Particularly for young voters or "ordinary citizens" the internet is understood to be an opportunity for engagement in public debates as well as for political activism (Michailidou et al., 2014, p. 17). According to Michael Bossetta et al., social media carries a "participatory promise" by helping users develop political knowledge and mobilise in new ways outside the formal political and mainstream media arena (Bossetta et al., 2017, p. 54). Such participation is considered crucial for political legitimacy, both at the EU and national level. Social media is seen as having facilitated a "social media demos" that "exerts unprecedented power" within the EU (Barisione & Michailidou, 2017, p. 9) through a more critical debate about European politics and policy.

These rather optimistic accounts of the digital public sphere have, however, also been met with more critical analyses. Literature on social media engagement in Europe has focused on the damaging impact of so-called "filter bubbles" or "echo chambers" in which people build largely closed spaces of communication (Flaxman et al., 2016). Such spaces result in "disrupted" public spheres and declining trust in institutions (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018). For example, significant ideological and largely nationally-contained cleavages were found within pro-EU and Eurosceptic party networks on Twitter (Heft et al., 2017). I agree with Michailidou et al. that a straightforward delineation of social media as "facilitating or constraining political action" (Michailidou et al., 2014, p. 31) is difficult given the dynamics of online communication. Yet, I argue that an intersectional approach that explicitly addresses the experiences of especially Black, migrant, minority, and trans women, as well as nonbinary, agender and gender-variant people, is essential for understanding democracy in the social media age. This would help to better capture the exclusions and opportunities of social media not just for citizens in general, but for the most marginalised groups. In this way, we can more fully assess the extent of not just the "participatory promise" (Bossetta et al., 2017) of social media as an open and equal space for debate about European politics but also its "emancipatory potential" (Fraser, 1992; Habermas, 1999).

2.2. The Digital Public Sphere and Intersectional Feminist Critiques

An intersectional feminist approach unpacks several dominant binaries within the literature: a public/private binary, a national/transnational binary, and an online/offline binary. Firstly, the idea of social media as a space for public deliberation and collective European will-formation rests upon a traditional distinction between the public and private spheres that reproduces long-standing gendered hierarchies and exclusions. According to Nancy Fraser, public opinion can be considered legitimate to the extent that it is inclusive—"open to all with a stake in the outcome" as well as guaranteeing participatory parity—offering participants "roughly equal chances to state their views" (Fraser, 2007, p. 61). Yet, she argues, Habermas' theory of the public sphere violates that principle, as it is predicated on a separation between the "public" domain of work and politics, from the "private" domain of family and intimacy. This has come to denote the "hegemonic mode of domination" (Fraser, 1992, p. 62) underpinning modern capitalist societies, situating bourgeois (white) women outside of citizenship and in the home (working class women especially of colour were nevertheless expected to work, often in the private sphere, to facilitate this). The public/private dichotomy is underpinned by a rational/emotional and mind/body divide that originated, as Charlotte Hooper notes, in an Enlightenment "fantasy of disembodiment" that strove for a separation of reason from the vulgarities of physicality, emotions, and desires (Hooper, 2000, p. 39).

While Fraser's work calls upon feminists to analyse gender "as one axis of inequality among others" (1989, p. 12), she has not explicitly used intersectionality. Intersectionality, as Patricia Hill Collins argues, is first and foremost interested in the intersecting structures of power that create "complex social inequalities that are organized via unequal material realities and distinctive social experiences for people who live within them" (Collins, 2015, p. 14). Crenshaw identifies three distinct forms of intersectionality: (a) structural, i.e., the different socio-economic and institutional locations of women of colour (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1250), (b) political, the marginal location of women of colour within both anti-racist and feminist interest groups, and (c) representational, the way in which women of colour are represented through dominant cultural narratives of race and gender (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1283). Intersectionality matters for the public sphere: While the private sphere was reserved for bourgeois white women who were considered capable of feeling, it was the denial of Black people's humanness altogether that served to justify

the European colonial project and the enslavement of African people (Phipps, 2021, p. 87).

Secondly, then, intersectional analysis can help to understand social media's role in facilitating inclusive public deliberation about European politics in a way that recognises the diversity of contemporary Europe (Siim, 2012, p. 4). Social media facilitates cross-border political communication as part of its "transnational promise" (Bossetta et al., 2017, p. 54), expected to connect citizens "across national borders and political levels" within a European digital public sphere (De Wilde et al., 2014, p. 3). Yet, following Gurminder K. Bhambra, the focus on diversity *between* EU member states should not be prioritised over the multicultural diversity *within* them that has resulted from European colonialism (Bhambra, 2015, p. 192). For Fraser, a legitimate transnational public develops under the "all-affected" principle in which people come together to debate issues relevant to them not because of formal citizenship but because their lives are all affected by the same national, transnational or supranational structures (Fraser, 2007, p. 63). Intersectionality therefore asks: To what extent are women, nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people, especially trans women and those of migrant and minority backgrounds, able to participate in social media debates about European politics? This question extends our analysis beyond the concepts of functional or geographical inclusiveness (see e.g., Roose et al., 2017) to include patterns of domination, subordination, and empowerment in a way that centres traditionally marginalised people as agents rather than (often invisible) objects of European politics.

Finally, intersectional feminist theory helps us to understand people engaging in public debates on social media as embodied, with offline lives and experiences. Existing literature on social media engagement with European politics has implicitly constructed an artificial binary between the "online" and "offline" spheres that also reproduces the mind/body divide. Disembodied internet users engaging in "rational" debate are imagined separately from offline structures of privilege and exclusion. Instead, Beth E. Kolko et al. call upon us to consider the "situatedness of the disembodied cyberself" (Kolko et al., 2000, p. 6). which, Francesca Sobande notes, is "always tethered to, and, by, different geographies and their borders and boundaries" (Sobande, 2020, p. 106). While to a certain extent social media allows for anonymity and invisibility, users also cannot "log in and simply shrug off a lifetime of experiencing the world from specific identity-related perspectives" (Kolko et al., 2000, p. 6). It is this separation of the offline and online spheres, Tegan Zimmerman argues, that both silences marginalised groups online and overlooks the possibilities for intersectional activism on social media (Zimmerman, 2017, p. 58).

In the following, I demonstrate the way in which analysing the online abuse of women and the possibilities for subaltern digital counter-publics sheds light on the extent to which social media as digital public spheres inhibit or facilitate "inclusiveness" and "participatory parity" as essential for a democratic transnational public sphere (Fraser, 1992, 2007).

3. Online Abuse as Participatory Inequality

Social media has been imagined as a space where "everybody is invited to participate" in European politics (see e.g., Roose et al., 2017, p. 271). This conception of social media follows from Habermas' argument that open access to the public sphere can be ensured by "disregarding" differences in status and coming together in debate as equals (1999, p. 50). Despite formal inclusion, women, nonbinary, agender and gender-variant folks, people of colour, and other marginalised groups face informal exclusions due to a "masculine" style of deliberation that results in silencing, preventing them from "participating as peers" (Fraser, 1992, p. 60). The interrupting, ignoring, mishearing, or dismissing of women's contributions demonstrates that public deliberation "can serve as a mask for domination" in which social inequalities are not "bracketed" but shape people's opportunities to participate (Fraser, 1992, p. 64). Scholars have acknowledged that online debates about European politics often do not conform to "deliberative" standards of argumentation, often including "uncivil" and derogatory comments and unrepresentative, mostly male users (Chen & Pain, 2017; Galpin & Trenz, 2019; Southern & Harmer, 2019). Such comments are juxtaposed with "civic" styles of engagement that respect generally accepted rules of good behaviour and are discounted as activity not reaching the standards of citizenship practice (Bossetta et al., 2017, p. 60). From a feminist perspective, however, the nature of such "non-civic" participation matters for how the digital public sphere relates to intersecting "offline" inequalities (Zimmerman, 2017, p. 62), resulting in unequal consequences for online democratic engagement.

Women, nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people experience gendered forms of online abuse that inhibit their opportunities for engaging with European politics. While cis men also experience online harassment, people of marginalised genders receive messages that are misogynistic in nature and that objectify or sexualise them, replicating and multiplying experiences also faced in the "real" world (Hackworth, 2018, p. 52). Social media users come together not only to reason, learn, and debate about European politics, but also, as Jane highlights, to oppress and injure in particularly gendered ways (Jane, 2014, p. 539). Rape threats, she notes, have become the "modus operandi" for criticising women in public life (Jane, 2014, p. 535). Ahead of the 2019 European elections, the United Kingdom Independence Party (UKIP) was criticised for selecting the prominent anti-feminist and far-right YouTuber Carl Benjamin (known as Sargon of Akkad) as a candidate. In response to her campaigns against online misogyny, Benjamin had in 2016 tweeted UK Labour MP

Jess Phillips that he "wouldn't even rape" her, clarifying in a new video in 2019 that "with enough pressure, I might cave" (Syal, 2019). A number of women MPs such as former Conservative (later ChangeUK) Anna Soubry reported receiving extreme and often sexually violent abuse and death threats while participating in Brexit debates such as "lol get jo coxed you old bint," referring to the Labour MP Jo Cox who was assassinated during the 2016 EU referendum ("MP Anna Soubry," 2016; Walker, 2017). Online messages also translated into verbal and physical harassment on the street. As I have argued elsewhere in an account of my own experience of sexual harassment following a public lecture, sexualised violence symbolically reduces women in the public sphere to their bodies, transporting them out of the public arena into the private sphere of sexuality (Galpin, 2020).

Representational intersectionality draws attention to the way in which online harassment is "multilayered in nature" and experienced differently by women of colour, trans women, and people of other marginalized genders (Hackworth, 2018, p. 56). Such experiences cannot be studied in isolation: Harassment of women of colour typically draws on dominant stereotypes of Black or minority women, while harassment of trans and queer people will often be homophobic or transphobic in nature (Hackworth, 2018, p. 58). The Black Labour MP Diane Abbott has been found to receive almost half of all Twitter abuse directed at women MPs (Amnesty International, 2018, p. 17). Abbott has recounted death and rape threats, messages describing her as an "ugly fat black bitch," and countless uses of the N-word (Parliament TV, 2017). Gina Miller, the Black British businesswoman and campaigner who successfully took the British government to court over its plans to trigger Article 50 of the Lisbon Treaty without parliament's consent, has reported threats of death, gang rape, and dehumanising racist slurs that, for example, described her as "just an ugly ape who needs whipping into obedience" and threatened that a "Jo Cox killing would be too good for you" (Anthony, 2018). Jewish women such as Labour (later ChangeUK/Liberal Democrat) MP Luciana Berger, have also been subject to violent anti-Semitic abuse—Berger received messages calling her a "vile fifth columnist," an "agent for a foreign power" and "Zionist scum" (Urwin, 2020). As a form of representational intersectionality, such examples demonstrate the way in which racist violence intersects with misogyny for women of colour and religious minorities engaging in European politics to reproduce specific discriminatory tropes. While white women MPs are symbolically removed from the public into the private, Black, Asian, Jewish, and Muslim women are dehumanised altogether.

The problem of online violence against women is not limited to the UK, but has been documented across Europe particularly in the context of immigration debates. Abusive discourses involving sexism/misogyny and racism are likely to be situated within national and transnational contexts (Siim, 2014, p. 118). For example, the Afro-German writer and anti-racist activist Jasmina Kuhnke was forced to move her entire family in 2021 as a result of having her address published online (known as being "doxxed") in a video involving death threats and racist images of her portrayed as an ape (Straatmann, 2021). Sawsan Chebli, a German Social Democrat politician, has also spoken of receiving extreme misogynistic and racist abuse, often orchestrated by the far-right party Alternative for Germany (AfD) and particularly after contributing to debates about the #MeToo movement (Kiesel, 2017). While the quote above sent to Miller reproduces a common trope about Black women as subject to the control and punishment of white men (Bailey, 2021), messages received by Kuhnke such as "You gotta ask yourself, how did she squeeze those brats out of that scrawny junkie-arse?," "be thankful we brought you out of the jungle, you dirty creature!" and "get the slave-trader there and let him take her away" (my translations) indicate the links between online abuse, misogyny, and wider discourses of European colonialism. Abuse directed at Black and minority women therefore uses dehumanising and derogatory images and stereotypes that result in them being "uniquely denigrated because of their gender and race" (Bailey, 2021).

Social media companies have developed limited policies on hate speech and harassment, while users' access to justice and protection depends on national legislation that diverges across Europe. The UK has used the 2003 Communications Act to prosecute some of the most violent offenders, such as the businessman Viscount Phillips who offered £5,000 for Gina Miller's death in a Facebook post using racist slurs. Germany has legislated against social media companies directly through the 2017 *Netzwerkdurchsetzungsgesetz*—the Network Enforcement Act, or "Facebook Act" that requires social media companies to take more effective action against hate speech. While the law has been criticised for threatening free speech, such legal measures also conceptualise online violence as individual acts rather than organised "networked misogyny" (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Structural intersectionality also shapes the type of support and response one will receive from the authorities (Crenshaw, 1991). Jasmina Kuhnke has recounted that, after turning to the police for protection when strangers started to turn up at her door, she was refused help on the grounds that there was no evidence of a threat. A YouTuber, incidentally a former policeman, who had targeted Sawsan Chebli was exonerated in court on the grounds of "free speech" for describing her as, amongst other things, an "Islamic talking doll" ("Bittere Nachricht für alle," 2020). Moves to address misogyny as a hate crime through the criminal justice system (see e.g., Scott, 2020) risks therefore taking the form of white feminism that fails to consider the impact of increased policing on people of colour.

Such abuse is a form of gender-based and racial violence that intends to exclude certain bodies from democratic debate. Kirsti K. Cole has argued that online

violence constitutes "disciplinary rhetoric" with the goal to "silence the women participating in public" (Cole, 2015, p. 356). Bridget Gelms has coined the term "volatile visibility" to describe the "abusive and potentially dangerous consequences that arise from particular moments of online publicity" (Gelms, 2020). Women often turn to self-censorship, through anonymity, changing what they write about or withdrawing from social media altogether (Jane, 2014, p. 536). Jess Phillips has spoken of her need to place heavy restrictions on her Twitter feed, which reduced her ability to engage with constituents, while Sawsan Chebli was forced to deactivate her Facebook account. Eighteen women MPs stepped down from the UK Parliament in 2019, many citing the impact of the abuse they received (Perraudin & Murphy, 2019). The murder of Jo Cox and the experiences of women such as Jasmina Kuhnke demonstrate the very real risk faced by women, nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people in public life that is not limited to the digital world but extends to offline threats to life. Yet, we know very little about the secondary impact the abuse of women in public life has on younger or lower-profile people who may otherwise have chosen to use their voice in public debates but opt out because of the likelihood of abuse/harassment.

4. Subaltern Digital Public Spheres—Spaces of Resistance?

Despite the abuse and violence to which many are subjected online, social media can also provide spaces of resistance for minoritized groups. The possibility of multiple digital public spheres is acknowledged as a way for marginalised groups to become empowered through the particular platform affordances of social media (see e.g., Barisione & Michailidou, 2017, p. 15). Yet, the possibilities for such engagement with European politics requires further theoretical specificity. Nancy Fraser argues that a single, comprehensive public sphere is undesirable in unequal societies. Instead, she envisages "subaltern counter-publics" as "parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses" (Fraser, 1992, p. 67). Through subaltern counter-publics, narrow understandings of "public" and "private" matters that exclude certain topics from debate can be expanded to incorporate marginalised group interests (1992, p. 73). Akane Kanai and Caitlin McGrane introduce the concept of a "feminist filter bubble," defined as "digital spaces in which sexist, misogynist and anti-feminist content is 'filtered out' so that focused feminist content and discussions can occur" (Kanai & McGrane, 2020, p. 2). Such spaces constitute a "vital form of protection" for feminist debate that has, for many, become a "material necessity" on social media (Kanai & McGrane, 2020, p. 2).

"Filtering practices" provide essential tools for feminist and anti-racist activism around global, transnational, and European issues that can mobilise alternative discourses and spark wider change (Wahba, 2016, p. 66). The #BlackLivesMatter and #MeToo movements have demonstrated the value of social media in facilitating global grassroots activism by offering a platform to people usually marginalised from mainstream media and formal politics and an opportunity to challenge mainstream narratives. Originating as a hashtag in 2013, #BlackLivesMatter resulted in widespread protests in 2020 not just in the US but also across Europe, bringing conversations about structural racism and colonial legacies to a wider public. #MeToo offered people a way to publicly share their experiences of sexual assault. Within EU debates specifically, dedicated grassroots women's campaigns have emerged such as the UK-based "Women Against Hate" (formerly Women Against UKIP) Facebook page, the German-based "Frauen Gegen die AfD" (Women Against the AfD) page and the Austrian "Omas Gegen Rechts" (Grandmas Against the Right). Social media also facilitates intersectional mobilisation. Black women use social media to communicate and build community across local, regional, and national borders (Sobande, 2020, p. 106). Extending from the US to encompass cases in the UK and wider Europe, the #SayHerName campaign is a "transnational, intersectional narrative" aimed at raising awareness of Black cis and trans women victims of police brutality overlooked in mainstream discourse (Brown et al., 2017, p. 1841). As Moya Bailey finds, such practices of resistance by Black women constitute "a form of self-preservation and harm reduction that disrupts the onslaught of the problematic images that society perpetuates" (Bailey, 2021).

Yet, spaces of resistance also create different forms of exclusion and marginalisation. As Kanai and McGrane note, feminist filter bubbles may not automatically be safe for everybody (2020, p. 2). Akwugo Emejulu's analysis of the anti-Trump Women's Marches (Emejulu, 2018) and Allison Phipps' examination of white feminism in the #MeToo movement demonstrate the way in which narratives of white women's victimhood have reproduced "colonial archetypes of people of colour as aggressive and frightening" (Phipps, 2021, p. 84), resulting in discursive overlap and indeed complicity with radical right politics in Europe. Using Crenshaw's political intersectionality, we can see how women of colour, trans women, and nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people are excluded from feminist campaigns through the universalisation of white cis women's experiences (Crenshaw, 1991, p. 1252). In the European public sphere, the incorporation of gender equality into understandings of the nation has othered Muslim men and silenced Muslim women's voices within gender activism (Siim, 2014, p. 122). This pattern became visible in responses to the Cologne sexual assaults on New Year's Eve 2016, which, despite anti-racist feminist attempts to change the discourse via the Twitter campaign #ausnahmlos (#noexcuses), resulted in a crackdown on immigration and deportations of Muslim refugees (Boulila & Carri, 2017). Islamophobic tweets that called for the protection

of "Western" women from Muslim men were prominent during the Brexit referendum (Evolvi, 2018, p. 11).

Recent years have also seen a concerning increase in transphobic discourse online (Brandwatch & Ditch The Label, 2019). The increasing focus of nationalist movements in Europe on LGBTQ+ rights has also found social media support amongst trans-exclusionary radical feminists whose objective is to bar trans women from so-called "women-only spaces" (Anarchasteminist & Moore, 2021). Online transphobia has materialised in legislation in context-specific ways: According to Ruth Pearce et al., at the same time that Hungarian President Viktor Orbán tabled anti-trans laws under the guise of conservative nationalist family values, the UK government was proposing anti-trans policies via the discourse of " 'respectable' middle-class feminism" (Pearce et al., 2020, p. 884). As Allison Phipps notes, trans-exclusionary campaigns rely on "accounts of sexual victimisation, set alongside a construction of trans women as predatory and essentially male" (Phipps, 2021, p. 88). Such movements construct trans women as "monsters" who are then ousted from both the public and private domains—thereby refused access to online subaltern feminist counter-publics but also denied the humanity of "complex feelings or to claim victimhood on their own behalf" (Phipps, 2021, pp. 88–89). Following Allison Phipps, then, white cis women are able to claim a space within online public spheres but do this through the marginalisation and also dehumanisation of trans women and people of colour (Phipps, 2021, p. 90).

The same platforms that allow for the development of subaltern counter-publics that contribute to the "emancipatory potential" of the public sphere therefore also facilitate the development of counter-publics that may be damaging for democratic engagement. Literature on social media engagement in European politics has noted the way in which social media has facilitated the rise to prominence of so-called "counter-elites" such as, for example, Donald Trump (Michailidou et al., 2014, p. 39). The development of closed online communities has also been associated with the radicalisation of extreme-right groups in Europe (Pavan & Caiani, 2017). Jess Phillips' report of receiving over 600 rape threats on Twitter in one night following Carl Benjamin's tweet (Snowdon, 2018) is one example of how online abuse is often orchestrated as "networked misogyny" (Bratich & Banet-Weiser, 2019). Yet, we have a limited understanding of the links between the anti-feminist "manosphere," transphobic groups, and radical right and extremist movements that impact on wider debates about political institutions and legitimacy.

Finally, structural intersectionality demonstrates how participation in subaltern counter-publics can be impeded by social media algorithms, policies, and platform affordances that perpetuate systemic discrimination. As Michailidou et al. argue, effective social media engagement requires not just being "allowed to speak out but to be heard" (2014, p. 64). Platforms influence this ability through the demotion of content and more extreme measures such as account deletion and shadowbans—techniques which prevent accounts and content from appearing in search results or user news feeds (Are, 2021, pp. 2, 13). Caroline Are traces the "shadowban cycle" in which social media companies, responding to public pressure over online abuse, "hit an easy target" of women's bodies (Are, 2021, pp. 13–14). The removal of content that is deemed unacceptably "sexual" or "private" has a disproportionate impact on women, LGBTQ+ people, sex workers, and people of colour, who may depend on social media for income or are constructed in overly sexualised ways in (trans)misogynistic discourse (Are, 2021, p. 3). Social media platforms determine who has a right to an online public presence, and who does not, through decisions shaped by business logics and dominant socio-cultural norms about acceptability (Gillespie, 2015, p. 2).

These exclusions matter, infringing the "all-affected principle" of the transnational public sphere. Radical right and nationalist parties promote conservative family values that target LGBTQ+ and gender equality rights, while their calls to strengthen border controls to crack down on "sex trafficking" result, as Nicola J. Smith notes, in policies that actually put migrant sex workers at greater risk of exploitation (Smith, 2020, p. 119). In the UK, sex workers from EU-27 countries have been arrested or deported from Britain due to lacking the legal documentation of waged work required to obtain "settled status" following Brexit (Smith, 2020, p. 120). The effect of account deletions and shadowbans by social media companies is to reduce the opportunities of those most affected by such movements to mobilise in political debate. Social media platforms are not, therefore, akin to a modern inclusive "town square" or "coffee house" where "everybody is invited to participate" but capitalist structures that reproduce offline inequalities and patterns of gendered and racialised exclusion.

5. Conclusion

The literature on social media engagement in Europe has demonstrated both the possibilities for transnational online engagement with European politics alongside the risks posed by filter bubbles and radical right and nationalist counter-publics for European democracy. The application of intersectional feminist theory aims to build on this work by exploring the possibilities for and barriers to social media participation through the lens of gender and race. There are two vital areas of research here that are "underpinned by a pressing ethical imperative" (Jane, 2014, p. 542): firstly, to gain a deeper understanding of the nature of online violence directed at women, nonbinary, agender, and gender-variant people within social media debates about European politics; secondly, to better understand the impact this violence is having on inclusive and participatory democratic debate about European politics; and thirdly, to

understand the opportunities and barriers created by social media for spaces of resistance. If debates about European politics are considered to be taking place in transnational digital spaces, and particular groups are either actively/violently excluded or marginalised through self-censorship, such debates cannot be democratically legitimate.

Such a research agenda nevertheless presents social media scholars with methodological challenges. Quantitative content or sentiment analysis of "big data"—often in collaboration with computer scientists—is mainstream within the political science literature, identifying the issues raised and actors engaged in public social media communication, as well as the geographical or territorial scope of debates. Discourse analysis of online tweets and comments is also common, while social network analysis is growing as a key approach. Yet, while offering the possibility of valuable and much needed data, such methods will only take us so far in the study of online abuse and resistance through subaltern counter-publics due to ethical and practical limitations. Firstly, much of the data required is not "public." Abusive or harassing messages are often sent privately through direct messages (DMs) or emails and often orchestrated via message boards and communities on the "dark web." While of course a lot of hateful or abusive messages are circulated in the public domain, many of the worst comments can nevertheless be moderated, especially on public pages with attentive administrators.

Secondly, studies typically decide a priori what constitutes "non-civic" or "abusive" content, focused on developing "uniform criteria" for content that violates democratic norms (Jane, 2014, p. 537). Yet, what is considered "abusive," "hostile" or "threatening" to one person may be perceived very differently to another. As such, Emma A. Jane's definition of "e-bile" is left open—requiring solely the use of technology and being "perceived by a sender, receiver, or outside observer as involving hostility" (Jane, 2014, p. 533). Our understanding of online abuse needs to shift from an exclusive focus on content to an analysis of the *impact* on individuals and the wider democratic system. Thirdly, resistance practices within subaltern counter-publics are likely to take place in, for example, closed groups on Facebook, or as community conversations via hashtags or temporary stories outside of "mainstream" forums and arenas. The nature of subaltern counter-spheres is often that they cannot be ethically studied without the explicit consent and approval of community members and may need to involve researchers who belong to the communities being analysed.

To answer intersectional questions about social media engagement in Europe, we therefore need to expand our methodological repertoire and consider tools such as digital ethnography, interviews, surveys, participatory and arts-based research, and more. The use of such tools, furthermore, needs to be underpinned by a reflexive and critical feminist epistemology that examines issues of power in academic research and explicitly aims at the transformation of gender and racial oppression in European politics in both the online *and* offline spheres. Such tools are already in use amongst (Black) feminist media scholars (see e.g., Bailey, 2021; Sobande, 2020), yet, conspicuous by their absence in political science.

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Article

All About Feelings? Emotional Appeals as Drivers of User Engagement With Facebook Posts

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Abstract
Political campaigns routinely appeal to citizens' emotions, and there is evidence that such appeals influence political behaviour. Social media, an important arena through which political actors communicate with voters, provide a rich source of data for investigating not only which communication strategies they use but also which of these engage followers. Building on political psychology and political communication literature, the present study investigates the relationship between appeals to specific emotions (fear, anger, enthusiasm, and pride) and the engagement that such posts generate on Facebook. We created an engagement index sensitive to the Facebook page follower count and employed multilevel modelling techniques. We conducted a manual content analysis of posts by British political parties and their leaders (*N* = 1,203) during the Brexit referendum debate on Facebook. We found that engagement with a post substantially increases when appeals to anger, enthusiasm, and pride are present. Conversely, there is no relationship between appeals to fear and engagement. Thus, the results indicate with observational data what we know about the effects of emotions from experimental research in political psychology. Emotions of the same valence (e.g., fear and anger) have a different relationship with user engagement and, by extension, political behaviour and participation online. This indicates that to fully understand the role of emotions in generating user engagement on Facebook, we must go beyond the positive and negative dichotomy and look at discrete emotions. Lastly, British political actors used Facebook communication to generate online political participation during the Brexit debate.

Keywords
Brexit; emotional appeals; Facebook; manual content analysis; political communication strategies; user engagement

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1. Introduction

Social media have become an important channel through which political actors communicate with the voters and an arena for political participation in which citizens can respond to political messages (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). On Facebook, these responses can take the form of "likes," "comments," "shares," and "reactions." Based on the logic of virality (Klinger & Svensson, 2015), when users engage with content through any of the above means of interaction, political actors' posts are spread to wider audiences. The more interactions with a post, the more visible it becomes, not only to political actors' followers but also to their respective networks (Bene, 2017; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). This increased visibility, in turn, has the potential to attract new voters (Bene, 2018), party members (Gibson et al., 2017), media attention (Bene, 2018; Chadwick, 2017), and even contribute to the electoral success (Bene, 2018). Triggering engagement from followers is thus an

important goal of effective political communication on Facebook (Bene, 2017).

Reflecting the growing consensus about the centrality of emotions in politics, the presence of emotions has been included in the analytical frameworks of several studies investigating what generates user engagement on Facebook (e.g., Bene, 2017; Blassing et al., 2021; Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015; Heiss et al., 2019; Jost et al., 2020; Martella & Bracciale, 2021; Metz et al., 2020). All the aforementioned studies find that the presence of emotion in a post leads to greater user engagement. However, the results are less conclusive when it comes to the role of positive and negative emotions. While some find that only negative emotion significantly increases user engagement (Bene, 2017), others find that the effect of positive emotion on engagement is stronger than negative (Heiss et al., 2019).

This study aims to shed more light on the role of emotion-eliciting message content in generating user engagement on Facebook and zoom in on appeals to discrete emotions. By appealing to emotion, campaigns can influence citizens' political behaviour (Brader, 2006). Research from political communication and political psychology further shows that to understand how emotions influence behaviour, we must consider the role of specific emotions (Brader, 2006; Weber, 2012). Today we know that even emotions of the same valence, for example, fear and anger, have different behavioural consequences. While anger is a powerful driver of political participation (Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011), fear can, in many cases, encourage withdrawal (Brader, 2006; Weber, 2012). Building on the existing body of research, the present study explores further and clarifies the role of emotion in generating user engagement with Facebook posts. We draw on political psychology and political communication literature and investigate the role of appeals to fear, anger, pride, and enthusiasm—four emotions considered most relevant in a political context (Brader, 2006; Ridout & Searles, 2011), in generating user engagement with political Facebook posts.

We conducted a manual content analysis of posts by British political parties and their leaders (*N* = 1,203) during the Brexit referendum debate on Facebook. We investigated the relationship between appeals to fear, anger, pride, and enthusiasm, and their respective levels of user engagement with the Facebook posts. We measured engagement by the total amount of interactions ("likes," "comments," "shares," and "reactions") a post received. While these represent different qualities of interaction, they all increase the visibility of Facebook posts and can be used as an indicator of how successful communication on Facebook is (e.g., Boulianne & Larsson, 2021; Gerbaudo et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). Further, interactions with posts can be used as metrics of civic engagement and political participation online (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015). We thus assume that the more interactions a post generates, the more successful its content is at mobilizing citizens to engage in political participation online.

We found that appeals to anger, enthusiasm, and pride are strong predictors of engagement, while appeals to fear had no effect. These results not only indicate that it is important to look at the influence of appeals to discrete emotions, going beyond the positive and negative dichotomy, but also that behavioural effects of emotions that we know mostly from experiments can also be detected using observational Facebook data. Beyond the substantive contribution of this article, our study strengthens the investigation of emotion and its effect on user engagement in two ways: First, employing a multilevel modelling technique accounts for clustering of the data at the Facebook profile level, which means that we correct for the similarities that posts from a political actor might share in terms of content and presence of emotional appeals. Second, by computing an engagement index that is sensitive to the number of followers of each political actor, we correct for the expected increased interaction count associated with having a larger follower base. The two approaches better account for the existing data structure of social media political communication.

2. Interactions on Social Media

Social media have become essential tools in political campaigning, allowing politicians to not only communicate with those who follow them but also reach secondary audiences when their followers engage with content (Vaccari & Valeriani, 2015). By interacting with politicians' posts, followers and their networks contribute to the circulation of posts, spreading them to a wider audience. User interactions can thus be considered a currency of social media (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). They are indicators of how successful politicians' communication is, and crafting messages that followers will interact with is one of the main aims of political actors who communicate on Facebook (Bene, 2017). Based on the interactions that their posts receive, politicians can understand what type of content generates engagement and use such insight in future communication (Jost et al., 2020).

For users, Facebook provides an opportunity to express their opinions and reactions to politicians' posts through different means of interaction. On Facebook, citizens can interact with politicians' posts by "liking," "commenting," "sharing," or "reacting" to them. Even though these interactions differ in quality and are considered distinct modes of expression (for an overview, see Larsson, 2018, p. 329), their aggregated number can be used to measure the overall engagement generated by content (Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018). Further, user interactions on Facebook can be used as metrics of civic engagement and political participation online (Gerodimos & Justinussen, 2015) and consequently allow us to investigate which communication strategies are successful at stimulating online political participation.

In this study, we investigate the relationship between appeals to specific emotions and user behaviour in the form of interactions with Facebook posts. The underlying assumption is that the more successful the post's content is at mobilizing users to engage in political participation, the more interactions it will generate. More specifically, we investigate whether appeals to anger, pride, and enthusiasm (emotions that we know from political psychology stimulate political engagement and participation; e.g., Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011), increase the overall engagement with Facebook content—and whether appeals to emotions such as fear (known to decrease political participation in various forms; Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2012) decrease it. Our dependent variable is thus the total amount of interactions that posts receive, which is also a known practice in the existing literature (e.g., Boulianne & Larsson, 2021; Gerbaudo et al., 2019; Keller & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2018).

Because emotions are at the centre of our study, an alternative approach could be to use Facebook's emotional reactions as dependent variables. While "haha" and "wow" are considered very ambiguous, "love" and "angry" reactions are positive and negative expressions of emotional states, respectively (Jost et al., 2020). However, Zerback and Wirz (2021) find that while posts eliciting anger trigger "angry" reactions and posts eliciting sadness trigger more "sad" reactions, they also unexpectedly found that "angry" reactions are, in fact, driven more strongly by the sad theme in posts. Consequently, while research on Facebook's emotional Reactions as expressions of users' emotions is growing and already providing useful insight, we cannot yet be sure of the extent to which the different emotional reactions can, in fact, be treated as valid expressions of specific emotions, especially beyond the positive–negative dichotomy. Further, out of the emotional reactions available on Facebook, only the "angry" reaction corresponds to one of the four emotions of interest in this study. Because of the above, and because what is of importance in this study is not finding out whether appeals to specific emotions make people experience those emotions, but the role that appeals to specific emotions play in the manifest behaviour of users, we have chosen overall engagement with posts as the dependent variable.

3. Emotional Appeals in Political Communication

Emotional appeals, understood as attempts to "stir the feelings of the audience when delivering a political message" (Brader, 2006, p. 4), are a widely used campaign communication strategy (Brader, 2006; Ridout & Searles, 2011). Research has further shown that political campaigns appeal to citizens' emotions deliberately and strategically (Brader, 2006; Crabtree et al., 2020; Ridout & Searles, 2011). By doing so, campaigns can affect voters' behaviour, shaping it in predictable ways (Brader, 2006; Crabtree et al., 2020). There also seems to be no doubt today that emotions play a crucial role in political behaviour (e.g., Brader, 2006; Marcus, 2002; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993). The political significance of emotions has been empirically linked to, among others, political participation (Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2012) and political learning and decision making (Brader, 2006; Marcus & MacKuen, 1993).

When investigating political communication strategies on social media and their role in generating user engagement, several studies have included emotion in their frameworks. They have all found that emotional content increases user engagement (e.g., Bene, 2017; Blassing et al., 2021; Heiss et al., 2019; Jost et al., 2020; Martella & Bracciale, 2021; Metz et al., 2020). However, the results regarding the effect of positive and negative emotions are less conclusive. Bene (2017) found that positive emotions have no significant effect on user engagement but that negative emotions do. Similarly, Martella and Bracciale (2021) found that especially negative emotional appeals successfully increase user interactions. On the other hand, Heiss et al. (2019) and Gerbaudo et al. (2019) found that the effect of positive emotions on user engagement is stronger than that of negative ones. We believe that two measures need to be taken to clarify further the role of emotions in generating user engagement: Taking a discrete, as opposed to a dimensional approach to emotions; and investigating emotional appeals instead of emotions expressed.

3.1. Dimensional and Discrete Approaches to Emotion

Research on emotion in politics has often focused on two dimensions of affect, positive versus negative (e.g., Marcus, 2002; Marcus et al., 2000), and most studies investigating the role of emotion in generating user engagement have followed this path (but see for example Blassing et al., 2021; Zerback & Wirz, 2021). However, we know that even emotions of the same valence differ from each other. For example, while fear and anger are both negatively valenced emotions, they have very different behavioural effects (e.g., Brader, 2006; Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Weber, 2012). Fear is, among others, equated with risk avoidance and decreased willingness to engage in many forms of political participation, while anger is a powerful motivator of participation in politics and often tied to risky action (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Valentino et al., 2011). Consequently, distinguishing between emotions of the same valence, instead of considering them as a single entity, can provide a more nuanced and accurate understanding of their influence. In the present study, we thus measure appeals to fear, anger, pride, and enthusiasm and investigate their relationship with user engagement.

3.2. Emotional Appeals and Emotionality

There are two main ways in which we can conceptualize the presence of emotion in campaign communication.

First, messages can be considered emotional when they contain emotional expressions. Second, messages can have characteristics or contain cues that make them likely to elicit certain emotional responses (Brader, 2006; Ridout & Searles, 2011). To date, most studies investigating the effects of emotion on user engagement have taken the first approach. Employing either content analysis, or tools such as sentiment analysis, the authors classified posts as containing positive or negative emotional language and expressions (for exceptions, see Martella & Bracciale, 2021; Zerback & Wirz, 2021).

We argue that operationalizing emotion in political communication as emotional appeals, understood as attempts to "stir the feelings of the audience when delivering a political message" (Brader, 2006, p. 4), can be a step toward further clarifying the role of emotion in generating engagement with Facebook content. Various message cues are likely to elicit specific emotions, and campaigns can use these cues strategically and deliberately to appeal to the emotions they want to elicit, thereby shaping the behaviour of voters in predictable ways (Brader, 2006; Crabtree et al., 2020). Messages aiming to elicit specific emotions can thus affect user behaviour and lead to different levels of user engagement. To investigate this further, we map the presence of emotional appeals in Facebook posts, and then investigate their role in generating user engagement. We draw inspiration from the approach taken by Brader (2006) and Ridout and Searles (2011) by translating the ideas of appraisal theories and Affective Intelligence Theory (AIT) into indicators of emotional appeals and expectations about their influence on the engagement.

4. Behavioural Consequences of Emotions and the Impact of Emotional Appeals on Engagement With Facebook Posts

This study examines the influence of appeals to fear, anger, pride, and enthusiasm on engagement with Facebook posts. In this section, we provide an overview of the behavioural consequences of the emotions of interest, drawing on AIT (Marcus, 2002; Marcus et al., 2000), appraisal theories (Lerner & Keltner, 2001; Smith & Ellsworth, 1985), and empirical research applying these (Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2012). We then use these to formulate hypotheses. Both AIT and appraisal theories examine the role of emotion in information processing and political behaviour. Despite differences between the theories, they largely agree on the behavioural consequences of the four emotions in this study and the circumstances under which they arise (although fear is a somewhat more complex case; for a brief discussion, see Brader, 2006, pp. 58–59).

Appeals to anger can be used to mobilize citizens to engage in the political process. Anger produces action (Lerner & Keltner, 2001), causes people to engage with politics (Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011), and reinforces existing partisan habits (Brader, 2006). It has been linked to increased mobilization and willingness to engage in various forms of political participation (Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2012). Consequently, we hypothesize:

> H1: Appeals to anger are positively associated with increased user engagement.

While of the same valence as anger, fear produces different behavioural outcomes. While anger is linked to action and less careful processing of events, fear is related to avoidance and more systematic information processing (Brader, 2006; Marcus et al., 2000; Valentino et al., 2011). Compared to anger, fear can cause withdrawal and lessen political engagement (Weber, 2012). While fear can increase the desire to participate politically in certain ways, it also encourages withdrawal from activities (Brader, 2006) and, overall, decreases willingness to participate in politics in various forms (e.g., Marcus et al., 2000; Weber, 2012). We thus hypothesize:

> H2: Appeals to fear are negatively associated with increased user engagement.

Enthusiasm involves an increased sense of being personally in control and facilitates approach over withdrawal (Weber, 2012). Further, it reinforces the desire to continue current actions and stay involved in the successful activity while reinforcing existing partisan habits (Brader, 2006). It increases political participation by transforming stimuli into political action; thus, it has been linked to increased political mobilization, including greater interest in campaigns, higher inclination to vote, and desire to volunteer (Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011). We hypothesize:

> H3: Appeals to enthusiasm are positively associated with increased user engagement.

According to AIT, pride indicates the enthusiasm dimension of the disposition system and thus has similar mobilizing effects on political behaviour (Marcus et al., 2000). Appraisal theorists, however, treat pride as distinct from enthusiasm because of its retrospective, as opposed to enthusiasm's prospective character (Lazarus, 2001). Further, pride has a unique influence on collective identities, and since these are important in campaign contexts, some empirical studies have also looked at pride separately from enthusiasm (Brader, 2006; Ridout & Searles, 2011). We hypothesize:

> H4: Appeals to pride are positively associated with increased user engagement.

5. Method

We employed a manual quantitative content analysis of communication by the four largest political parties

in the British Parliament in 2016, as well as the UK Independence Party (UKIP) due to their important role in Brexit. We analysed messages posted by the official party's Facebook profiles and pages of their leaders two months before and one month after the referendum. The Brexit debate had "strong emotional overtones" (Degerman, 2019, p. 829), and various scholars have emphasized the central role of emotion in Brexit (e.g., Degerman, 2019; Moss et al., 2020). Further, a number of researchers and commentators emphasize the importance of social media in this context (e.g., Brändle et al., 2021). Consequently, the Brexit referendum debate on Facebook makes a suitable case study to investigate the use and role of emotional appeals.

5.1. Sample

The dataset consists of posts published on the official pages of the Conservative Party, the Labour Party, the Liberal Democrats, the Scottish National Party (SNP), and the UKIP, as well as their respective leaders David Cameron, Jeremy Corbyn, Tim Farron, Nicola Sturgeon, and Nigel Farage. We also included Boris Johnson in the sample, as he played an important role in the Brexit referendum campaign despite not being the official party leader at that point. Both party and individual politicians' profiles were included because user interactions can differ depending on the type of Facebook profile (see Heiss et al., 2019). Responding to calls for more research on political communication on social media outside of strictly campaign communication (e.g., Blassing et al., 2021), we looked at posts from 23 April 2016 to 23 July 2016, representing two months before and one month after the Brexit vote. This timeframe allowed us to investigate the role of emotions in engagement with political communication both during the contentious Brexit campaign and its aftermath. All Facebook posts and interactions with them were downloaded using Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2018) in August 2020. From a total of 1,260 posts, 57 were removed because of missing data and text (N = 1203).

5.2. Engagement as Dependent Variable

We created an overall engagement index that sums up all interactions. The underlying assumption is that the higher the number of interactions with a post, the more successful the content is at mobilizing users to engage in online political participation. We are particularly interested in whether user interactions are decreased by appeals to fear and increased by appeals to anger, enthusiasm, and pride. Consequently, we consider the dependent variable, which combines all popularity cues a post received as a suitable measure. Additionally, our engagement measure accounts for the number of followers each Facebook profile had, as these impact the total amount of interactions that posts on different Facebook profiles generate. Because it is not possible to retrospectively find out the exact number of followers a page had at a given moment in the past, the number of followers was recorded during the data collection process in August 2020. We propose that the count obtained during data collection is useful and sufficient. Statistically, the relationship between emotional appeal and engagement (without accounting for follower count) is as strong as in the model presented in the article (see Appendix C in the Supplementary File). However, the engagement formula presented here fits the data better.

$$\text{Engagement} = \frac{\text{“Reactions''} + \text{“Comments''} + \text{“Shares''}}{\text{Followers}}$$

5.3. Independent and Control Variables

Variables were coded binary for each post (1 = presence, 0 = absence). We conducted two rounds of inter-coder reliability with the researcher coder and a non-expert coder. The second round of testing yielded Krippendorf's alpha scores on a 10% sample of posts ranging from 0.695 to 1. All variables of interest were reliable (see Appendix A in the Supplementary File).

Independent variables: Emotional appeals. The coding scheme of emotional appeals is an extension of AIT and appraisal theories to the field of political communication, based on the notion that specific message cues elicit different emotions (Brader, 2006). We only coded emotional appeals in text. Because we are not interested in tapping into the emotional reactions of the coders, the coding question was, following Brader (2006) and Ridout and Searles (2011), "which emotion did the author of the post aim to evoke?" Further, to ensure theoretical precision, for the appeal to any of the four emotions of interest in this study to be coded as present, a post had to contain theoretically derived indicators. Appeals to fear, for example, featured content associated with threat, an uncertain future, or uncontrollability (Brader, 2006; Lazarus, 1991; Marcus et al., 2000). The coding scheme can be found in Appendix E in the Supplementary File. Multiple emotional appeals could be coded as present in a post. 61.2% of posts contained no appeal to emotion, 32.4% at least one emotional appeal, 6.0% two emotional appeals in one post, and just under 1% contained three or more emotional appeals.

Control variables. The following variables were included as controls: (a) Populist content: Several studies (e.g., Bobba, 2019; Jost et al., 2020) found that populist messages drive user engagement (but see Martella & Bracciale, 2021). Consequently, and because populism is thought to have played a central role in Brexit (e.g., Clarke & Newman, 2017), we control for the presence of populist content, understood as communicatively expressing people-centrism, anti-elitism, and ostracizing "the Others" (Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). (b) Party vs. individual politician profile, as this could impact engagement (Heiss et al., 2019). (c) Because political actors can communicate differently in pre- and post-election

periods (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020), we control for communication before the referendum vote and after. (d) The frequency of posts, because the more often a profile posts, the fewer reactions a specific post might receive (Bene, 2017). (e) The presence of immigration, sovereignty, and economy as topics in the post, as these were the most important issues of the Brexit referendum campaign (Hobolt, 2016). And (f) Length of the post (e.g., Heiss et al., 2019).

6. Results and Analysis

6.1. Descriptive Analysis

Before discussing the association of emotional appeals with engagement, we present some descriptive results. Table 1 focuses on the political Facebook profiles.

Considering the number of followers and the mean engagement for each political actor, Nigel Farage has the highest engagement with his posts of 0.10 (followers = 1,002,437). He is followed by Nicola Sturgeon (0.09), UKIP (0.07), and Tim Farron (0.06), all of whom have significantly lower numbers of followers. However, from the high follower accounts, Jeremy Corbyn (followers = 1,641,689) has a high engagement score of 0.05. The engagement scores are, to a great extent, specific to the different political actors. Perhaps both Nigel Farage and Jeremy Corbyn have high engagement with their messages because they have an established political member base. Given the increasing personalization of politics, particularly on social media (e.g., Metz et al., 2020), it is perhaps not surprising that four out of five party profiles generate less user engagement than profiles of individual politicians.

Turning to the content, Table 2 shows that 39% of the posts contained an appeal to at least one of the emotions of interest in this study. Appeals to anger and enthusiasm were most prevalent, each present in 17% of posts. Appeals to pride and fear were significantly less frequent, appearing in 7% and 5% of the posts, respectively. Looking at the control variables, populist content was not very prominent in our data. Fifteen percent of the posts contained people-centrism, 17% anti-elitism, and 3% ostracizing "the Others." Lastly, 25% of the posts contained at least one of these elements. The distribution of posts between individual politicians and party profiles was fairly even, with 48% being by a politician and 52% by a party profile. Further, 75% of the posts were created before the Brexit referendum vote, which was expected since the data was collected for two months before the vote and only one month after.

Table 3 shows that enthusiasm and anger were the emotions that were appealed to most frequently. These were followed by pride, while fear was the least prevalent emotional appeal. Nigel Farage, UKIP, and Boris Johnson used appeals to emotion most frequently (appeals to at least one emotion in 61%, 56%, and 43% of their Facebook posts, respectively). Appeals to enthusiasm made up a considerable part of their communication—featuring in 43%, 28%, and 28% of their posts, respectively. A post by Boris Johnson is a good example of an appeal to enthusiasm:

> We have less than ten days until we get the chance to take back control of our country and crucially our democracy, and Vote Leave. In these remaining days we need to do all we can to keep banging the drum about why it is time for us to believe in ourselves, to believe in Britain and what we can do.

This post featured content associated with potential success and the achievement of one's goals (in this case leaving the EU) and strengthening commitment to achieving this goal by emphasizing the audience's role in making it come true. While fear was overall the least used emotional appeal in the political Facebook posts, David

Table 1. Profile-level variables and mean engagement scores for political actors.

Facebook profile	Frequency of posts	Followers	M engagement	SD engagement
Nigel Farage	142	1,002,437	0.10	0.12
Nicola Sturgeon	33	409,672	0.09	0.14
UKIP	132	515,912	0.07	0.06
Tim Farron	48	36,321	0.06	0.09
Jeremy Corbyn	163	1,641,689	0.05	0.09
David Cameron	104	1,147,033	0.04	0.04
SNP	138	325,702	0.04	0.10
Boris Johnson	86	1,811,737	0.02	0.03
Conservatives	37	751,561	0.01	0.02
Labour	174	1,096,195	0.01	0.02
Liberal Democrats	146	204,371	0.01	0.02

Notes: Engagement scores were normalized for ease of interpretation; the values range between *min* = 0 and *max* = 1 (*M* = 0.04, *SD* = 0.08).

Table 2. Number of posts and percentage of post-level variables (N = 1,203).

Variable	N	%
Emotional appeals		
Anger	203	17
Fear	57	5
Pride	83	7
Enthusiasm	207	17
Total	467	39
Populist content		
People-centrism	175	15
Anti-elitism	203	17
Ostracizing "the Others"	37	3
Total	297	25
Politician/party profile	576	48
Brexit campaign	905	75
Topics		
Immigration	110	9
Sovereignty	118	10
Economy	105	9
Brexit referendum	719	60
EU	45	4
Tradition & values	114	9
Labour & welfare policy	201	17
Security & foreign politics	144	12
Party politics & elections	259	22
Environment	27	2
Other	57	5
Purpose of post		
Mobilization	495	41
Self-promotion	185	15
Information	476	40
Other/Unclear	2	0.2

Table 3. Percentage of emotional appeals for each political actor.

Profile	Anger	Fear	Pride	Enthusiasm	Total
Boris Johnson	18	2	17	28	43
Conservatives	11	0	0	8	19
David Cameron	6	17	13	8	40
Jeremy Corbyn	28	2	6	8	39
Labour	22	9	2	7	37
Liberal Democrats	9	3	5	25	38
Nicola Sturgeon	15	3	0	3	18
Nigel Farage	16	3	13	43	61
SNP	9	0	1	4	14
Tim Farron	10	0	6	10	25
UKIP	27	7	11	28	56

Cameron used it most frequently out of all investigated political actors (17%). Advocates of Britain leaving the EU often referred to the Remain campaign as "Project Fear," and the findings of this study seem to indicate that there was some truth to the Leave campaign's accusation.

Overall, the appeals to emotions that are known to mobilize people to participate in politics have been employed much more frequently than appeals to fear. As the next section shows, appeals to enthusiasm, pride, and anger seem to have worked as intended and significantly increased user interaction.

6.2. Predicting Engagement With Facebook Posts

To analyse the influence of emotional appeals on engagement, we fitted several mixed-effects models with random intercept (Table 4), thus accounting for the clustering of the data at the political actor level.

Focusing on how the models were built, Model 0 represents the null model containing just the random intercept, namely the political actor variable. The intraclass correlation coefficient = 0.34, which means that 34% of the variance in engagement is explained at level 2 (political actor) of the model, therefore justifying the need for a multilevel modelling technique. Model 1 introduces the predictors = different emotional appeals, the fixed effects explaining 8% of the variance. The variables were introduced successively in different models to observe the degree of model improvement with each step. Model 2 is considered the full model, introducing the controls (elements of populist content and other relevant profile and post-level variables). Model 2 is a statistically significant improvement over model 1, explaining 25% of the variance with the variables in the fixed effects part of the model and 45% of the variance in total.

The dependent variable was positively skewed, which means that there are more observations with lower engagement scores on the left side of the distribution than on the right side with higher scores (see histograms in Appendix D of the Supplementary File). To be able to fit a linear regression model, we took the natural logarithm of the engagement variable to manage the normal distribution assumption. This changed the interpretation of the regression coefficients as follows: They represent the estimated percentage change in outcome with one increased unit in the predictor. All three models were fitted with the logged outcome variable.

$$Y_i = \left(\exp(\beta_i) - 1\right) \times 100$$

To test our hypotheses, we fitted a mixed-effects model (model 2) with a random intercept linear model predicting engagement from appeals to emotions present in text and elements of populist content, as well as political variables and topic issues included as controls, Pseudo $R^2 = 0.45$. Three out of the four emotional appeal variables have a significant positive effect on engagement. The presence of anger is associated with increased engagement by 58%, pride with increased engagement by 59%, and enthusiasm by 83%. Thus, hypotheses H1, H3, and H4 are supported. However, the presence of fear does not decrease engagement significantly. Therefore, H2 is not supported.

Additionally, while the three emotional appeals are associated with a substantial increase in engagement with Facebook posts, the engagement increase occurs at different rates: anger elicits the least strong increase in engagement of just over half. Contrastingly, enthusiasm is associated with the highest increase in engagement of 83%, surpassing the effect size of appeals to pride (59%). Positive emotions, specifically appeals to enthusiasm, are associated with the greatest increases in users' engagement with political posts.

Further, from the included control variables, whether the post was from the Brexit campaign period or after had a significant effect on engagement. Posts after the Brexit vote generated more engagement ($M = 0.07$) than those during the Brexit campaign ($M = 0.03$). Neither elements of populist communication, relevant Brexit topics, whether the post originated from a party or politician, how often the accounts posted, or the length of the post were significantly related to users' engagement.

6.3. Appeals to Emotions as Part of Populist Content

One potential area of concern was that due to the often-posited emotionality of populism and populism's "extra emotional ingredient" (Canovan, 1999, p. 6), the measurements of appeals to emotion and populist content would tap into the same concept. Figure 1 shows that while there is one strong correlation ($r = 0.5$ between appeals to anger and attacking the elites), all other correlation coefficients indicate moderate or small correlations. Furthermore, the variance inflation factor (VIF) values for the appeals to emotion and populist content showed no evidence of multicollinearity in the mixed-effects model predicting engagement. VIF values ranged between 1.10–1.55 (see Appendix B in the Supplementary File). Statistically, emotional appeals and populist content variables do not measure the same concept.

7. Conclusions

Our study aimed to shed more light on the relationship between emotions and user engagement with political Facebook posts during the Brexit referendum debate. The strengths of our study are both theoretical (coding manually for appeals to discrete emotions instead of positive and negative emotional expressions in text) and methodological (employing multilevel modelling techniques and a weighted engagement index to account for the particularities of social media data). Below we present the extent to which political actors used different emotional appeals in their Facebook communication, then we discuss the strong positive relationship between appeals to specific emotions and increasing user engagement.

Table 4. Estimates for mixed-effects models with random intercept predicting user engagement.

	M0 Engagement	M1 Engagement	M2 Engagement
(Intercept)	−99.58***	−99.66***	−99.71***
	(27.06)	(25.63)	(77.59)
Emotions			
Fear		−8.23	−5.13
		(15.54)	(15.60)
Anger		71.98***	57.52***
		(8.58)	(9.58)
Pride		88.16***	59.00***
		(13.17)	(12.87)
Enthusiasm		96.27***	82.65***
		(9.17)	(9.10)
Controls			
People#			17.86+
			(9.91)
Elites#			−4.88
			(10.51)
Others#			10.09
			(22.76)
Politician/party profile			136.78+
			(47.39)
Brexit campaign			−50.85***
			(7.27)
Freq. post			0.15
			(0.40)
Length post			−0.00
			(0.00)
Immigration			13.43
			(12.92)
Sovereignty			17.53
			(12.56)
Economy			9.83
			(11.29)
N	1,203	1,203	1,203
Pseudo *R2* (fixed effects)	0.00	0.08	0.25
Pseudo *R2* (total)	0.34	0.39	0.45
Random effects			
Var (level 2)	0.78	0.74	0.60
Var (level 1)	1.09	1.03	0.98
AIC	3665.55	3542.34	3447.82
BIC	3680.82	3577.99	3534.39
ANOVA model improvement		***	***

Notes: # = elements of populist content, + $p \leq 0.10$, * $p \leq 0.05$, ** $p \leq 0.01$, *** $p \leq 0.001$; coefficients and standard errors were transformed with this formula for ease of interpretation: $Y_i = \left(\exp(\beta_i) - 1\right) \times 100$.

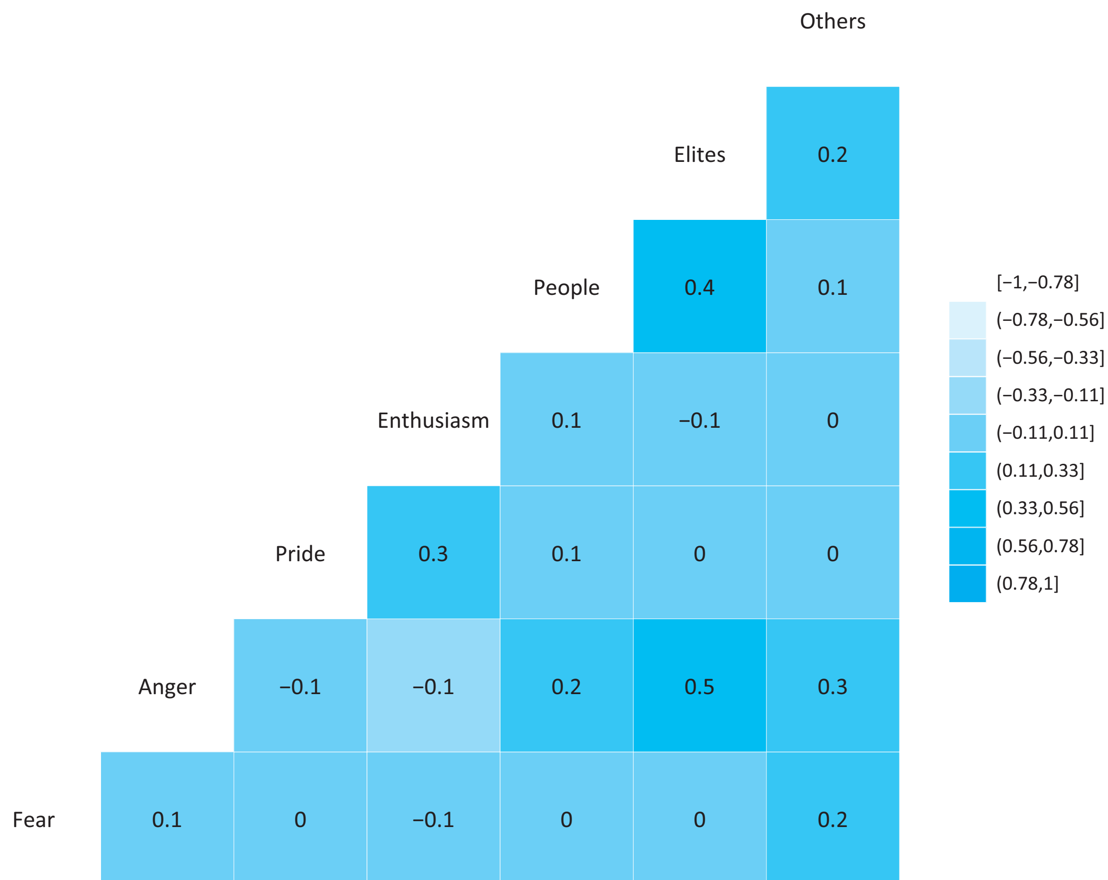

Figure 1. Correlation matrix between appeal to emotions and populist content.

7.1. Use of Emotional Appeals in Political Communication on Facebook

The majority of the political actors under scrutiny appealed to anger, enthusiasm, and pride much more frequently than fear. Reflecting existing research (Brader, 2006; Ridout & Searles, 2011), this finding suggests that political actors strategically appealed to citizens' emotions. It also indicates that political actors have a good understanding of how to communicate with voters on Facebook effectively. On Facebook, the follower base of politicians largely consists of those who already support them, and the "strategic value of this friendly audience lies in mobilization…rather than convincing them of policy propositions" (Stier et al., 2018, p. 55). Since appealing to anger, enthusiasm and pride can not only stimulate political mobilization but also reinforce existing partisan habits (e.g., Brader, 2006), it makes sense that political campaigns appeal to these emotions when they "preach to the converted" on Facebook (Stier et al., 2018, p. 55). Appeals to fear were not used frequently by any political actors considered in this study, except for David Cameron. Fear appeals can be used to persuade undecided voters and make the opponent's supporters reevaluate their decisions while placing less weight on prior convictions (e.g., Brader, 2006). If the main aims of political campaigns are to persuade and mobilize voters, the majority of political actors considered in this study used Facebook for the latter purpose. Consequently, while our findings on the use of appeals to different emotions on Facebook might not be very surprising, they indicate that how political actors communicate with their followers on Facebook might not be entirely unproblematic from a normative perspective. Even appeals to enthusiasm, which at face value are not negative, are likely to make citizens rely more strongly on prior convictions and stick to their choice of candidate, which can further polarize voters (Brader, 2006).

7.2. Relationship Between Emotional Appeals and User Engagement on Facebook

In line with three of our theoretically derived hypotheses, the results indicate that specific emotional appeals have a strong and distinct positive association with user engagement. Facebook posts containing appeals to anger, enthusiasm, and pride—emotions that have been linked to increased mobilization and willingness to engage in various forms of political participation (e.g., Brader, 2006; Valentino et al., 2011)—generate significantly more user engagement than posts without. Further, our results show that appeals to fear are not negatively associated with increased engagement with Facebook posts, as we initially expected. While the

literature proposes that fear causes withdrawal rather than mobilization and participation in various political activities (e.g., Valentino et al., 2011; Weber, 2012), our data did not exhibit any relationship between appeals to fear and engagement.

We cannot be certain that anger appeals used by political actors on Facebook do make people angry, enthusiasm appeals make people feel enthusiastic, or pride appeals make people proud. However, the manifest behaviour of users seems to support the notion that by appealing to specific emotions, campaigns can shape voter behaviour in predictable ways (Brader, 2006; Crabtree et al., 2020). This, in turn, shows that the different behavioural mechanisms we know of mostly from experiments can partially be detected with unobtrusive, observational data. Overall, the fact that appeals to fear and anger, two emotions of the same valence, show such different relationships with user engagement underscores the importance of considering discrete emotions in future research on the role of emotions in political campaigning and engagement on social media.

Another important finding of this study is that populist communication (understood as expressing people-centrism, anti-elitism, and ostracizing "the Others"; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007) does not increase user engagement. This holds both for the three elements separately and when the different elements are aggregated. This contradicts the findings of some previous studies but is in line with the results of a recent study by Martella and Bracciale (2021). While populism has an "extra emotional ingredient" (Canovan, 1999, p. 6) and is often associated with especially negative emotions, our findings show that when we systematically disentangle populism and emotional appeals, it is the latter that drive engagement. We believe this observation should be factored into future studies on the effects of populist communication on user interaction.

7.3. Limitations

The limitations of our study open up avenues for further research. First, we only coded emotional appeals in textual communication. However, emotional cues can be much more than what is expressed in text, including colours, objects, symbols, and music (Brader, 2006). Consequently, to get an even more thorough picture of the use of emotional appeals and the role they play in generating engagement, more research should factor in emotional appeals on social media originating from other modalities than text (e.g., pictures, videos). Related to the above, not controlling for the format (picture, video, link) of the post, which we were not able to retrieve due to technical reasons, is a limitation of this study. Second, from a theoretical perspective, both positive emotions included in this study, namely enthusiasm and pride, have the same mobilizing effect on political participation. Future studies should also look at the role of positive emotions that do not stimulate political participation (e.g., compassion), although these have been proven difficult to code reliably with manual content analysis (Ridout & Searles, 2011), which was the main reason we did not include it in this study. Third, engagement could also have been affected by both variables we did not control for and factors that we could not control, such as paid content and Facebook recommendation algorithms.

Despite these limitations, our study contributes to knowledge about political communication and citizen engagement on social media. The overarching implication of our findings is not only that appeals to emotion are a successful campaign strategy on Facebook, but also that to fully understand their distinct effects on engagement, we need to differentiate between appeals to specific emotions instead of grouping them along the positive–negative axis. In addition, studying citizen engagement with politics with social media data poses particular challenges: (a) In dealing with observational data, we lack insight into how algorithms promote content and thus influence engagement, which limits our ability to control for confounding factors that drive engagement; and (b) analysing ready-made, existing political communication and responses to it, we necessarily make assumptions about the intentions and meaning of both political communication and citizen engagement. Therefore, our choices about the variables of interest (e.g., appeals to emotions as opposed to emotions present in text) or calculations for engagement indices are consequential for the theoretical conclusions we draw.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Conflict of Interests

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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Article

Pandemic Populism? How Covid-19 Triggered Populist Facebook User Comments in Germany and Austria

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Abstract
Covid-19 and the government measures taken to combat the pandemic have fueled populist protests in Germany and Austria. Social media played a key role in the emergence of these protests. This study argues that the topic of Covid-19 has triggered populist user comments on Facebook pages of German and Austrian mass media. Drawing on media psychology, this article theorizes populist comments as an expression of "reactance," sparked by repeated "fear appeals" in posts about Covid-19. Several hypotheses are derived from this claim and tested on a dataset of N = 25,121 Facebook posts, posted between January 2020 and May 2021 on nine pages of German and Austrian mass media, and 1.4 million corresponding user comments. To measure content-based variables automatically, this study develops, validates, and applies dictionaries. The study finds that the topic of Covid-19 did trigger populist user comments and that this effect grew over time. Surprisingly, neither the stringency of government measures nor mentions of elitist actors were found to have the expected amplifying effect. The study discusses the findings against the background of governing the ongoing crisis and worrisome developments in the online public sphere.

Keywords
Covid-19; fear appeals; populism; social media; user comments

Issue
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1. Introduction

In the course of the Covid-19 crisis, the government measures taken to combat the pandemic have been increasingly met with protests in several European countries. In Germany and Austria, these protests by "coronasceptics" have been particularly visible as large-scale demonstrations and on social media. Initial research has linked these protests to populist ideology, highlighting that both populists and coronasceptics deeply distrust elites and reject restrictions of "the people's" will (Brubaker, 2021; Eberl et al., 2021; Nachtwey et al., 2020). Although other scholars have stressed that there is no uniform response of populists to Covid-19 (Wondreys & Mudde, 2020), empirical studies remain scarce.

This study focuses on populist responses of ordinary citizens to Covid-19 on social media. More specifically, this article analyzes how the topic of Covid-19 and aspects of the crisis management affected the scope of populist user commenting on Facebook pages of German and Austrian news media outlets. Facebook has proven to be a preferred medium of populist citizens (Schulz, 2019) and gained importance for expressing protest during lockdowns when much of public life has shifted online (Pressman & Choi-Fitzpatrick, 2021). Boberg et al. (2020) argued that a "pandemic populism" is unfolding on Facebook. The aim of this study is to contribute to our understanding of the conditions that give rise to citizen engagement in populist grassroots politics on social media. Understanding these conditions is vital in the ongoing Covid-19 crisis because this helps to assess problems of the crisis communication and to find political strategies for countering a trend toward post-truth politics (Waisbord, 2018a).

Populist communication research so far has been focused on communication by political elites (e.g., Blassnig & Wirz, 2019; Ernst et al., 2019) or by the media (e.g., Wettstein et al., 2018), or on its effects (e.g., Rooduijn et al., 2017). Few studies, however, have focused on populist messages generated by regular users of online platforms (Blassnig et al., 2019; Galpin & Trenz, 2019). None of these studies has focused on Facebook comments or researched the impact of news topics on populist user comments. This study asks how the topic of Covid-19 and certain aspects of the crisis management affected populist user comments on Facebook pages of German and Austrian mass media outlets.

Discussing the news in user comments on social media has the potential to foster public deliberation (Dahlberg, 2011). However, reality often looks different. In the "participatory populism" scenario, a small but active group of users engages in writing comments that demonize elites, undermine the institutions of representative democracy, and counter the news or expert knowledge with "common sense" (Galpin & Trenz, 2019). This article expects that during the crisis, the topic of Covid-19 has attracted more such populist user comments than other topics. Repeated "fear appeals" (Witte, 1992) to comply with the restrictive government measures taken to fight the pandemic may have sparked populist commenting behavior as an expression of what media psychology calls "reactance" (Dillard & Shen, 2005). Elaborating on this argument in the theory section, this study hypothesizes that this effect grew over time, increased with the stringency of Covid measures, and was amplified by mentioning elite actors.

To test these hypotheses, this study uses an original dataset of N = 25,121 Facebook posts and 1.4M corresponding user comments, collected from nine popular Facebook pages of German and Austrian mass media outlets. The data cover a time frame from January 2020 to May 2021. The dependent variable, the number of populist Facebook comments per post, and central explanatory variables are measured by automated content analyses, using and validating Gründl's (2020) populism dictionary and self-constructed dictionaries. Hypotheses are tested in negative binomial regression models. The findings show that posts about the topic of Covid-19 did attract more populist user comments and that this effect grew over time. The study did not find the hypothesized amplifying effects of government measure stringency and mentions of elite actors. The findings are discussed against the background of governing the ongoing crisis.

2. User Comments as Participatory Populism

Over the past decade, social media has fundamentally changed the way political news is produced, distributed, and consumed (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). Crucially, social media has turned the audience from receivers of content into producers themselves (Klinger & Svensson, 2015, p. 1246). This becomes evident in the comments feature of the most popular social media platform, Facebook (Newman et al., 2020, p. 29). Most news outlets today maintain a Facebook page where they disseminate news items in posts. Facebook users can respond directly to these posts in comments. Such comments allow users to react on specific news items (Galpin & Trenz, 2019), engage in discussions with others (Macafee, 2013), and influence others' perceptions and behavior (Zerback & Fawzi, 2017). Unlike anonymous user comments on media websites, Facebook comments disclose the opinion expressed by users to their network of Facebook friends (Rowe, 2015, p. 542) and increase the visibility of the post (Klinger & Svensson, 2015). This study focuses on user comments on Facebook pages of news media outlets. Here, commenting on the news on Facebook is understood as a low-effort form of citizen engagement and political participation (Knoll et al., 2018).

From a normative perspective, user comments have the potential to contribute to a plural, participatory public sphere (Galpin & Trenz, 2019, p. 783). Deliberative democratic theory has welcomed user comments as facilitating citizens' engagement in debates that guide informed opinion formation—given the debates meet criteria, such as reciprocity, civility, or rationality (Dahlberg, 2011; Friess & Eilders, 2015). Comments can also give marginalized voices access to the public or foster counter-publics (Dahlberg, 2011, p. 861). Although such interactive technologies raised high hopes at the turn of the millennium, scholars paint a less positive picture of the online public sphere today. Comments sections may function as "echo chambers" that reinforce previously held beliefs and aggravate polarization among the audience (e.g., Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Comments are also notorious for a brusque tone and incivility, rendering the deliberative quality of online discourses questionable (e.g., Coe et al., 2014). Facebook comments have been found to exhibit even lower levels of deliberative quality than comments on news websites (Rowe, 2015). Pfetsch (2018, p. 60) argued that today's online public sphere is increasingly characterized by a discordance of citizens "up to the level of plain populism." Populist user comments on Facebook and the conditions that give rise to them are the focus of this study.

According to Mudde (2004, p. 543), *populism* is an ideology that clings to the idea that a "corrupt elite" rules and deceives "the people," and favors the unrestricted sovereignty of the people. At its core, populism entails the dimensions *anti-elitism*, *people-centrism*, and *popular sovereignty* (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019, p. 3). This ideology can manifest itself in messages from politicians and citizens alike (de Vreese et al., 2018, p. 427). Theorists have noted the ambivalent relationship between populism and democracy (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012). Although populism's demand for popular sovereignty supports a core feature of democracy, its crude majoritarianism and anti-pluralism brings it into

conflict with liberal democracy (Canovan, 1999, p. 7; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2012, p. 17). This ambivalence is reflected in attitudes and participatory behavior of populist citizens (Zaslove et al., 2021). Populist citizens have been found to embrace "expressive non-institutionalized modes of participation" (Anduiza et al., 2019, p. 109) and hence are likely to express their views in user comments online. Galpin and Trenz (2019) introduced the term "participatory populism" for populist user comments that respond to online news and have pointed out negative consequences of this form of citizen engagement. This study follows this critical normative assessment, and suspects that populist user comments deteriorate the quality of online deliberation because their anti-pluralism, Manichaeism, and devaluation of expert knowledge constitute obstacles to civil, reciprocal, and informed online debates (Galpin & Trenz, 2019, p. 784; Waisbord, 2018b).

Citizens and social media users have been repeatedly theorized as originators of populist messages (Engesser et al., 2017, p. 1284; Esser et al., 2017, p. 371; Krämer, 2017, p. 1294). The bulk of empirical research on populist communication, however, has been focused on political elites (e.g., Ernst et al., 2019) or the media (e.g., Wettstein et al., 2018). Few studies have investigated populism in user comments empirically (Blassnig et al., 2019; Galpin & Trenz, 2019). Galpin and Trenz (2019) focused on populist user comments on media websites during the 2019 European Parliamentary elections and found a clear anti-representative attitude in the user comments. Blassnig et al. (2019) analyzed comments reacting to news articles about immigration on media websites from three West European countries and found that populism in articles triggers populism in comments (Blassnig et al., 2019, p. 643). This article exceeds several limitations of these studies. First it broadens the sample size, given previous studies have analyzed only the first 10 to 20 comments per article (Blassnig et al., 2019, p. 636; Galpin & Trenz, 2019, p. 797). Second, this study shifts the focus from news websites to comments on Facebook, which has proved to be highly popular among populist citizens (Schulz, 2019). Finally, the study asks a previously unasked question: How do news topics, and Covid-19 in particular, affect the scope of populist commenting?

3. The Pandemic and Populist User Comments

The pandemic has been accompanied by protests of "coronasceptics" and a proliferation of conspiracy myths online (Stephens, 2020). Scholars quickly linked these phenomena to populist ideology (Boberg et al., 2020; Brubaker, 2021; Eberl et al., 2021; Nachtwey et al., 2020). Following Brubaker (2021), these protests pick up anti-elitist and people-centric narratives because they challenge expert knowledge and juxtapose it with "common sense." Preliminary findings from a survey among German-speaking coronasceptics substantiated these claims (Nachtwey et al., 2020). Additionally, coronasceptics' calls to defy Covid measures can be understood as attempts to restore popular sovereignty. Yet, it is not self-evident that populists profited from this crisis as they did from previous crises (Buštíková & Baboš, 2020, p. 505; Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). In fact, at the beginning of the crisis, the Austrian and German population was highly supportive of the government measures (Kittel et al., 2021; Naumann et al., 2020).

Against this backdrop, populist political parties in Germany and Austria initially struggled to find a position on Covid crisis management. In Austria, the Freedom Party (Freiheitliche Partei Österreichs [FPÖ]), a "prototypical" populist radical right party that has been successful since the 1980s (Mudde & Rovira Kaltwasser, 2013, p. 155), first pursued a discourse of "national unity" and supported the government measures, only to shift to a "coronasceptic" stance in April 2020 (Opratko, 2021). From then on, party representatives repeatedly questioned the credibility of public health experts and demonized the government measures as threats to freedom and democracy (Opratko, 2021). In Germany, the relatively young, populist radical right party Alternative for Germany (Alternative für Deutschland [AfD]; Fawzi et al., 2017) initially demanded even stricter measures to combat the pandemic (AfD, 2020), only to speak of a "Corona-Dictatorship" in a speech by Alexander Gauland (Deutscher Bundestag, 2020, p. 23358) in October 2020. The German left-wing populist party The Left (Die Linke), however, countered "coronasceptic" discourses (Die Linke, 2021). This study speculates that the shifts in the positions of populist (radical right) parties were in no small part driven by the emergence of a "coronasceptic," populist grassroots movement, which became increasingly vocal on social media. Instead of analyzing the consequences of such grassroots populism, the present study focuses on the conditions that shape populist grassroots engagement of ordinary citizens on social media. Specifically, this study aims to answer the question of how the news topic Covid-19, and aspects of the crisis management, have affected the scope of populist commenting on Facebook in Germany and Austria.

Drawing on psychological literature and public health communication research, this study expects that the topic Covid-19 strongly attracts populist comments. Facebook posts about Covid-19 arguably contain "fear appeals" (e.g., Witte, 1992). Fear appeals are, in a nutshell, "persuasive messages designed to scare people by describing the terrible things that will happen to them if they do not do what the message recommends" (Witte, 1992, p. 329). Reports about a global pandemic do convey a frightening message. Moreover, such reports frequently include behavioral recommendations about how to avoid an infection. Though journalists may not be the initiators of such persuasive attempts, this article assumes that Facebook posts about Covid-19 frequently reiterate persuasive messages issued by government officials or public health experts. Following the "indexing" hypothesis, such reiteration is particularly likely in times of crisis (Bennett et al., 2007).

Fear appeals, like any persuasive messages, can fail. One form of failure that is observed when the recommended behavior entails restrictions on personal freedoms is called "reactance" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981; Dillard & Shen, 2005). Reactance is "the motivational state that is hypothesized to occur when a freedom is eliminated or threatened" (Brehm & Brehm, 1981, p. 37), which is arguably the case with restrictive Covid-19 measures. Though reactance is difficult to observe directly, it has been associated with rejective attitudes and behaviors, such as denying the existence of the threat, committing forbidden acts, or exercising a different freedom (Dillard & Shen, 2005, p. 146). This article argues that populist user comments can be understood as a symptom of reactance. Populist comments undermine the credibility of the sender and the content of the message, for example by suggesting that the media is lying (Krämer, 2017, p. 1293). In the case of Covid, this questions the very existence of the threat (Brubaker, 2021, p 6). Furthermore, populist comments may call to reestablish lost freedoms by breaking Covid rules or may themselves constitute a compensatory behavior that provides a feeling of control (Dillard & Shen, 2005, p. 146). This study argues that posts about Covid-19 trigger populist comments as a symptom of reactance:

> H1: Posts about Covid-19 attract more populist comments than other posts.

Frequent repetitions of persuasive messages have been found to undermine persuasive attempts, decrease statement credibility, and trigger reactance (Koch & Zerback, 2013). Ernst et al. (2017) showed that this is particularly the case for highly negative messages. Posts about Covid-19 address a highly negative topic and have been repeated frequently since the outbreak of the pandemic. In our data, 36% of all posts featured this topic. Following these considerations, this study expects that the effect hypothesized in H1 increases over time:

> H2: The attraction of Covid-19 posts for populist comments grows over time.

Third, given reactance is understood as a reaction to impending restrictions to personal freedom (Brehm & Brehm, 1981), this article expects a moderating effect of the stringency of Covid measures. Growing stringency of the measures implies greater restrictions on personal freedoms, and—if the reasoning here is correct—a larger tendency to respond with reactance-related behavior. Understanding the connection between government measures and populist citizen engagement on social media also helps us fathom possibilities to counter populist online behavior politically.

> H3: The attraction of Covid-19 posts for populist comments grows with the stringency of government measures.

Following a different line of thought, populist user comments can be understood as expressions of preexisting populist attitudes that are activated by a priming effect (Blassnig et al., 2019, p. 634). Priming, in communication research, refers to the effect that media content has on recipients' subsequent judgments and behavior (Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002, p. 97). Priming activates specific concepts and cognitive schemata by increasing their accessibility in the recipient's memory (Blassnig et al., 2019, p. 634; Roskos-Ewoldsen et al., 2002). According to Krämer (2014, pp. 55–56), populist attitudes constitute such a schema that can be activated by specific message characteristics. This study argues that mentioning elite actors, especially government representatives and public health experts, may activate preexisting "populism schemata" (Krämer, 2014) and consequently increase the readiness of populist-minded users to express their views in user comments. Governmental representatives and public health experts have been the most visible actors in navigating the Covid-19 crisis (Brubaker, 2021, p. 2). Both actor groups are well established enemy images in populist communication and function as elitist scapegoats in populist blame attributions (Hameleers, 2018). This populist blame game should be particularly relevant in complex crisis situations because it creates a sense of security (Hameleers, 2018, p. 2180). Understanding how the visibility of public health experts affects populist citizen engagement online also helps us assess problems of crisis communication in the ongoing crisis. This lies in difficult terrain in which we face both an increased demand for expert knowledge and challenges from post-truth politics (Brubaker, 2021; Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Waisbord, 2018a). This study expects that mentioning government representatives and experts amplifies the positive effect of the topic of Covid-19 on populist commenting:

> H4a: The attraction of Covid-19 posts for populist comments grows with mentioning government representatives.

> H4b: The attraction of Covid-19 posts for populist comments grows with mentioning experts.

4. Methods

To test these hypotheses, this study used data collected from the Facebook Graph API. Using digital trace data enhances external validity, compared to experimental designs, where populist expressions might be held back (Blassnig et al., 2019, p. 630). By selecting the cases of Germany and Austria, this study followed a most-likely research design (Levy, 2008, p. 12): If the hypothesized relations could not be found in these countries, where "coronasceptic" protests have taken on the proportions of a civic movement, they were unlikely to be found elsewhere. In Germany, the largest demonstrations of coronasceptics happened in summer 2020, and they gained

traction in Austria in winter 2020–2021. Both countries are characterized by a similar political, historical, and economic background and faced similar challenges from the pandemic. Additionally, the common language allowed a consistent application of the content analysis tools.

4.1. Data

This study selected nine highly popular Facebook pages from media outlets, covering quality press (AT: *Der Standard*, *Die Presse*; DE: *Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*), tabloid press (AT: *Kronen Zeitung*, *Ö24*; DE: *Bild*), and public broadcasting news shows (AT: *Zeit im Bild*; DE: *Tagesschau*) in both countries. The selection followed a two-stage process. First, accounting for a hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013), this study selected online news websites that are backed by traditional media brands and ranked them by their weekly reach in 2020 (Newman et al., 2020, pp. 63, 71). Then the corresponding Facebook pages were identified and ranked by the number of Facebook fans (on February 2020). The aim was to pick two Facebook pages per country for each category for quality press and tabloid press, and one page from a public broadcaster. For this study, Facebook pages that maximized the number of Facebook fans and the weekly reach of the associated website were selected. For Germany, this procedure resulted in preferring Facebook pages of weekly quality press (*Der Spiegel*, *Die Zeit*) over daily quality press because the former reached a larger online audience. Apart from *Bild*, there is no nationwide tabloid newspaper in Germany. For each Facebook page, the maximum number of publicly accessible Facebook posts, posted between 1 January 2020 and 30 May 2021, was downloaded from the Facebook API using Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2020), resulting in N = 25,121 posts. For each Facebook post, up to 200 user comments were downloaded. This upper limit is considerably larger than the average number of Facebook comments per post, 134. In total, this study considered 1,443,273 Facebook user comments. The API returns user comments in anonymized form. Because the API returned data that were skewed toward recent posts, the study controlled for the posts' age at time of downloading.

4.2. Dependent Variable

The dependent variable here is the *number of populist user comments* per Facebook post, reflecting the scope of a collective populist voice in the Facebook comments section (Galpin & Trenz, 2019, p. 782). To classify user comments as populist, this study applied an automated content analysis, employing Gründl's (2020) populism dictionary. Dictionary measurements count the occurrence of keywords in texts. Gründl's (2020) dictionary is tailored to social media content in the German language and covers all three conceptual dimensions of populism as defined earlier: *anti-elitism*, *people-centrism*, and *popular sovereignty*. Previous dictionary measurements of populist communication have been focused on anti-elitism alone (Rooduijn & Pauwels, 2011), ignoring people-centric messages and demands for popular sovereignty. This study suspects that these two dimensions play a vital role in populist user comments, where "the people" arguably make themselves heard (Hameleers, 2018, p. 2179). In addition to this improved conceptual fit, Gründl's (2020) dictionary is technically superior to previous attempts because it covers a wide range of multiword expressions and outperformed other populism dictionaries in validity tests (Gründl, 2020, p. 13). In this study, a user comment was considered populist when at least one populist keyword was found. This accounts for the brevity of the comments (20 words avg.) and has been found sufficiently discriminating judged by face validity (see Appendix C in the Supplementary File). Because automated content analyses raise questions of validity (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013), this study validated all measurements thoroughly, as reported in the next section. The dependent variable is the aggregated count of populist Facebook comments per post.

4.3. Explanatory Variables

Three central explanatory variables are dichotomous indicators of a post's message characteristics: mentioning the topic of Covid-19, government figures, or experts. To measure these variables, this study developed, applied, and validated original dictionaries. Appendix A in the Supplementary File documents the dictionaries and their development. Additionally, this study captured whether a post mentioned the topics of party politics, economy, or border/migration, which might well have attracted populist comments (Betz, 1994; Burscher et al., 2015). This study tested validity of all dictionary measures against human coding of 450 posts and 450 comments. Both random samples were stratified to ensure sufficient coverage of the coded categories. Two coders, a student and the author, followed a codebook (see Appendix B in the Supplementary FIle) and reached satisfactory reliability scores when parallel-coding 80 posts and comments (see Table 1). Along with Krippendorff's alpha for reliability, Table 1 reports the validity scores *precision*, *recall*, and *F1*. *Recall* indicates how well a dictionary captures all relevant documents, *precision* how well it captures only relevant documents, and *F1* is a harmonic mean of both. All measurements reached satisfactory scores, especially when compared to dictionaries in other tasks (Atteveldt et al., 2021, p. 128).

To operationalize time, this study computed the difference in days between the date of the post and the date when the WHO declared a global pandemic (March 11, 2020). Stringency of Covid-19 measures was operationalized as the stringency index coded by the Oxford Covid-19 Government Response Tracker (Hale et al., 2020).

Table 1. Reliability and validity test.

Concept	Krippendorff's α	Recall	Precision	F1
Populism[1]	0.81 (n = 80)	0.79	0.72	0.75
Covid[2]	0.97 (n = 80)	0.91	0.96	0.93
Government[2]	0.90 (n = 80)	0.86	0.80	0.83
Experts[2]	0.76 (n = 80)	0.84	0.74	0.79
Party politics[2]	0.69 (n = 80)	0.77	0.85	0.81
Economy[2]	0.80 (n = 80)	0.70	0.77	0.73
Border/Migration[2]	0.92 (n = 80)	0.71	0.85	0.77

Notes: [1] in comments, [2] in posts.

4.4. Control Variables

In addition to controlling for other topics and the download age as mentioned previously, this study controlled for the severity of the crisis, using the rolling 7-day mean of daily new infections per 100,000 inhabitants of each country, based on data included in the Oxford Tracker (Hale et al., 2020). To model the number of times a populist comment could have been observed, all models included the logged number of downloaded comments per post plus 0.1 as an offset (Hilbe, 2011, p. 134). All continuous independent variables but the offset were standardized and centered on population mean, while *stringency* and *new cases* were centered to their country mean. Table 2 reports summary statistics of all variables prior to transformation.

4.5. Model Specification

Because the dependent variable was a count variable and overdispersed, this study used negative binomial regression models to test the hypotheses (Hilbe, 2011).

Table 2. Summary statistics.

Variables	Min.	Max.	Mean/n	(SD)/(%)
Dependent variable				
Populist comments per post (count)	0	165	1.5	(3.3)
Explanatory variables				
Covid	0	1	8,924	(36%)
Government	0	1	3,522	(14%)
Experts	0	1	1,717	(6.8%)
Day count to/since March 11, 2020[2]	−70	445	257.4	(143.1)
Stringency of government measures[3]	0	85.2	64.1	(20.1)
Controls				
Economy	0	1	2,628	(10%)
Borders/migration	0	1	904	(3.6%)
Party politics	0	1	1,869	(7.4%)
New Covid-19 cases per 100k inhabitants[3]	0	83.6	17.3	(19.2)
Download age[2]	0	395	75.2	(74.9)
Facebook accounts (grouping variable)				
DER SPIEGEL (DE)	0	1	2,253	(9.0%)
DIE ZEIT (DE)	0	1	2,243	(8.9%)
Bild (DE)	0	1	2,243	(8.9%)
tagesschau (DE)	0	1	2,216	(8.8%)
Kronen Zeitung (AT)	0	1	4,514	(18%)
oe24.at (AT)	0	1	4,045	(16%)
DER STANDARD (AT)	0	1	3,054	(12%)
Die Presse (AT)	0	1	3,739	(15%)
Zeit im Bild (AT)	0	1	814	(3.2%)
Offset				
Downloaded comments per post	0	200	57.3	(70.7)
Total comments per post[1]	0	13,257	134.4	(389.5)
Total (N posts)			25,121	

Notes: [1] not in model, [2] z-standardized, [3] standardized and centered at country mean.

To account for the clustering of the data on Facebook page level, this study ran fixed-effect models, which cancel out effects between accounts and focus on the effects on post level (Bell & Jones, 2015, p. 139). Random-effects models confirmed the robustness of the findings, as documented in Appendix D in the Supplementary File.

5. Results

The descriptive statistics reported in Table 2 show that populist comments were a rather rare event in our data, with a mean of 1.5 populist comments per post. The results of the negative binomial regression models illuminate the factors that influenced the frequency of populist comments (see Table 3). Model 1 includes all basic variables, while model 2 adds the interaction terms. Hypothesis 1 posited that posts about Covid-19 would attract more populist comments than other posts, which is supported by the positive, significant coefficient for "Covid" in both models. Because the coefficients are not directly interpretable, this study computed average marginal effects (AME). These tell us that mentioning Covid increased the predicted count of populist comments by .14, holding all other variables at their observed values and then averaging across predictions for the whole sample. The only message characteristics that reached larger AMEs were mentioning the government (.28) and political parties (.71).

Hypothesis 2 posited that the effect of the topic of Covid would grow over time. This is supported by the significant, positive interaction term "Covid*Day count." The plot on the left in Figure 1 visualizes this effect, plotting the average predicted count of populist comments, conditional on "Covid" and "Day count." The standardized day count variable on the x-axis has a mean of zero, which corresponds to November 23, 2020, while one unit (SD) change represents 143 days. The solid line indicates the average predicted count for posts that mentioned the topic of Covid-19, while the dotted line relates to posts that did not. The distance between both lines on

Table 3. Results of negative binomial regression models.

	Dependent Variable: Populist comments per post (count)	
	(1)	(2)
Explanatory variables		
Covid	0.09 (0.02)***	0.10 (0.02)***
Government	0.17 (0.02)***	0.28 (0.03)***
Experts	−0.05 (0.03)	−0.18 (0.07)**
Day count	0.25 (0.01)***	0.20 (0.02)***
Stringency	−0.05 (0.01)***	−0.06 (0.02)***
Interaction terms		
Covid*Government		−0.20 (0.04)***
Covid*Experts		0.15 (0.08)
Covid*Day Count		0.10 (0.02)***
Covid*Stringency		0.08 (0.02)***
Controls		
New Covid-19 cases	0.01 (0.01)	0.00 (0.01)
Download age	−0.06 (0.01)***	−0.06 (0.01)***
Economy	0.03 (0.03)	0.04 (0.03)
Borders/Migration	0.11 (0.04)**	0.08 (0.04)*
Party politics	0.43 (0.03)***	0.42 (0.03)***
Accounts		
DER SPIEGEL (GER)	−0.13 (0.03)***	−0.13 (0.03)***
DIE ZEIT (GER)	0.11 (0.04)**	0.11 (0.04)**
Bild (GER)	−0.58 (0.03)***	−0.56 (0.03)***
Der Standard (AT)	−0.28 (0.05)***	−0.30 (0.05)***
Die Presse (AT)	−0.07 (0.04)	−0.08 (0.04)*
Kronen Zeitung (AT)	−0.46 (0.03)***	−0.48 (0.03)***
oe24.at (AT)	−0.25 (0.03)***	−0.26 (0.03)***
Zeit im Bild (AT)	−0.11 (0.04)**	−0.11 (0.04)**
Observations	25,121	25,121
Akaike information criterion (AIC)	57,068.08	56,975.54
Bayesian information criterion (BIC)	57,230.71	57,170.69

Notes: ***p < 0.001; **p < 0.01; *p < 0.05; Offset: Downloaded comments (n + 0.1, logged).

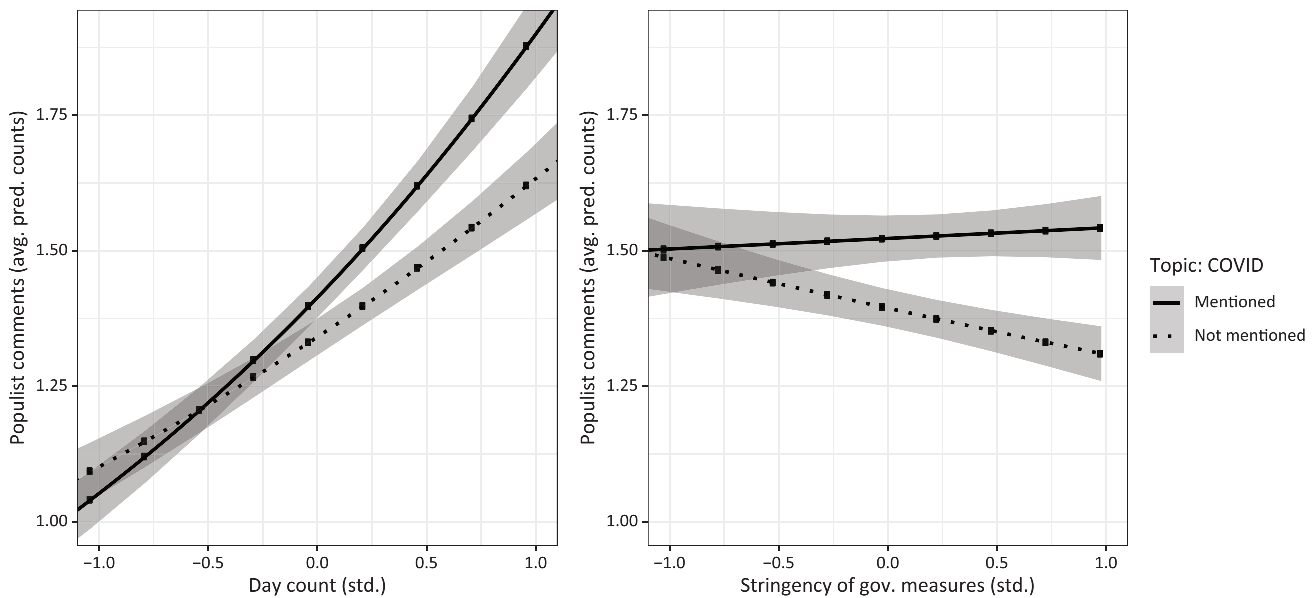

Figure 1. Interaction effects of Covid with time and with stringency (avg. pred. counts, 95% confidence intervals).

the y-axis indicates the AME of "Covid," conditional to time, with the gray area indicating the 95% confidence interval. The plot shows that the AME of "Covid" grew from a negative effect in summer 2020 to .27 in mid-April 2021, moving from −1 to +1 on the x-axis. The slope of the dotted line, however, indicates that the number of populist comments grew over time for other posts as well, an effect that is difficult to interpret.

Hypothesis 3 suggested an analogous interaction effect of the topic of Covid and measure stringency. Surprisingly, the overall effect of stringency was negative. With Covid measures getting stricter, fewer populist comments were observed overall. This negative relationship was driven particularly by posts that did not mention Covid-19, as indicated by the dotted line in the plot on the right side of Figure 1. Surprisingly, this relation was not reversed but muted for posts that mentioned "Covid," as indicated by the low slope of the solid line. Although the conditional effect of government stringency for posts that mentioned Covid-19 was tendentially positive, increasing the average predicted count of populist comments by .04 when moving from −1 SD to +1 SD, this effect did not surpass the 5% significance threshold. Based on these findings, this study discarded hypothesis 3 and discusses implications in the concluding section.

Hypotheses 4a and 4b posited an amplification of the effect of Covid posts by mentioning the government and experts. Mentioning the government had an independent, positive effect on the number of populist comments. Surprisingly, mentioning experts did not and even had a negative effect in model 2. The expected interaction effects (H4a and H4b) were not confirmed by the models. Instead, model 2 estimated a significant, negative coefficient for "Covid*Government." In this case, the negative sign indicates that the positive effect of "Government" shrank when Covid was mentioned but not that Covid posts attracted fewer populist comments if they mentioned the government.

The control variables indicate that the topics of migration and political parties attracted populist comments and that the download age affected the outcome. The dummy variables for the Facebook pages, which account for clustering of the data, suggest that the page of the baseline category, *tagesschau*, was only surpassed by *Die Zeit* in attracting populist comments. The concluding section interprets the findings substantially.

6. Conclusions

This article set out to study a problematic form of citizen engagement in the context of the Covid-19 crisis: populist commenting on news reports on Facebook. The study focused on Germany and Austria, where protests by "coronasceptics" grew into a civic movement that exhibited an affinity toward populist ideology (Nachtwey et al., 2020). Using a dataset of N = 25,121 Facebook posts and 1.4 million comments, posted between January 2020 and May 2021, and a validated, dictionary-based content analysis, this study analyzed how the topic of Covid-19 has attracted populist user comments on nine Facebook pages of German and Austrian mass media outlets.

The findings show that the topic Covid-19 has attracted more populist user comments than other posts and that this effect has grown over time. Apparently, the Facebook audience became increasingly annoyed by this topic and expressed this discontent by writing a growing number of populist comments. This article suggested interpreting these comments as expressions of "reactance" (Dillard & Shen, 2005) and as a consequence of failed "fear appeals" (Witte, 1992) that are

arguably contained in posts about Covid-19. The growing effect of Covid posts over time supports this interpretation because previous studies have shown that repeating appeals increases reactance (Koch & Zerback, 2013). This finding confirms the well-established argument that crisis situations provide favorable conditions for populism (Hameleers, 2018, p. 2180), at least for the grassroots-like, populist citizen engagement on social media analyzed here. However, the finding that this effect only unfolded over time and the discussed initial struggles of populist political parties to find a coherent stance toward the crisis management indicate that this relationship might be more complex than in previous crises (Brubaker, 2021; Wondreys & Mudde, 2020). Future research should explore the interplay between populist citizen engagement online and the positioning of populist parties in the context of the Covid-19 crisis further.

This study analyzed additional conditions under which citizens engage in populist commenting on social media. Surprisingly, the analysis did not find that the stringency of government measures triggered populist user comments or amplified the effect of the topic of Covid-19. An ad hoc explanation of this finding is that subjectively perceived restrictions of freedom might be more relevant for "coronasceptic" populists than objective restrictions (similarly, see Nachtwey et al., 2020, p. 60). This result also has implications for policy makers. Based on this finding, one cannot hope that relaxing the Covid-19 measures would considerably appease populists online. Decision makers may also be relieved that this study did not find that mentioning government representatives or public health experts amplified the attractiveness of Covid posts for populist comments. However, this study did find independent, positive effects for mentioning the government and political parties. Inspecting the content of the populist comments more thoroughly shows that mass media became a main target of populist attacks and was frequently decried as conformist propaganda (see Appendix C in the Supplementary File). Unfortunately, this finding takes its place in a growing list of worrisome developments in the online public sphere (e.g., Coe et al., 2014; Pfetsch, 2018). If social media users increasingly defame mass media reports as outright lies, the very basis for debates in the comments section gets lost. Although this development might be countered by moderating practices, more research on such counterstrategies is needed.

This study was not without limitations. Owing to its primary focus on populism and Covid, this study did not measure "reactance" and "fear appeals" directly and provided only circumstantial evidence for the psychological explanation suggested here. Appendices A and D in the Supplementary File report an attempt to measure fear appeals, which was discarded because it did not fully meet validity requirements. Future research is encouraged to test the psychological arguments presented in this study more directly in experimental designs. Further limitations stem from the applied automated content analysis. Although the dictionary approach used here enabled an efficient analysis of a large corpus of text and performed well in the validity tests, the depth of the resulting insights is limited. For example, it would be desirable to learn more about the actors who are attacked in populist comments; about related concepts, such as the spread of misinformation; or about comments that are critical toward the Covid measures but not necessarily populist. Future research may approach these questions using a nuanced, manual coding scheme. The study is also limited by its country selection. Extending this research to a comparative study of other European countries might provide more robust findings about the relationship between Covid-19 government measures and populist commenting.

Finally, contributing to a broader theme of this thematic issue, I want to address challenges for academic research that arise from working with the Facebook API. Accessing the Facebook API has become more and more difficult for researchers in the past few years. Many social media scholars today are dependent on endeavors like Facepager (Jünger & Keyling, 2020). Such programs, however, have a precarious status themselves and constantly run the risk of losing the access granted by Facebook. A different problem is the lack of transparency and constant changes of the Facebook API. The data returned sometimes exhibit gaps or skewness for unclear reasons. This study included a download age control variable in the models to account for such biases. Recently, the Facebook API discontinued returning comment IDs, which renders the analysis of interactive user comments difficult. The anonymization of the comments is welcome for privacy reasons but certainly poses challenges for testing sociological and psychological explanations. The research community should clearly provide more institutional support for critical infrastructure such as Facepager in the medium term and establish free and reliable access to social media APIs in the long term.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

The Informational Consequences of Populism: Social Media News Use and "News Finds Me" Perception

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Abstract
Prior studies have theorized a positive association between people's populist attitudes and an increased use of social media to consume news, which will be mainly driven by individuals' engagement with news that reflects their people-centered, anti-elitist, and Manichean understanding of politics. However, such general connection remains elusive. This research seeks to further clarify this strand of the literature by incorporating people's belief that important political information will find them without actively seeking news—"News Finds Me" perception (NFM). For that, we use online survey data from two European countries that differ regarding the ideological political supply side of populism (Italy and Portugal). The main results suggest that citizens who hold stronger populist attitudes will also develop stronger NFM. Furthermore, findings reveal a mediating effect of social media news use on the effects of populist attitudes over NFM. That is, those who hold stronger populist attitudes tend to use social media to get exposed to public affairs news more often, which in turn explains the development of the NFM. These results emphasize the importance of systematically exploring citizens populists' attitudes within today's social media, social networks, and complex information systems.

Keywords
Europe; News Finds Me perception; news use; populism; social media

Issue
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1. Introduction

Scholars' interest in the relationship between populism and social media seems logical considering the rapid (re)emergence of populist forces around the globe and the pervasive use of social media across countries. While abundant approaches to this topic exist (Engesser et al., 2017; Ernst et al., 2019; Jeroense et al., 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Rae, 2021; Reinemann et al., 2016; Schulz, 2019; Stier et al., 2020), two main broad questions seem to be attracting academic attention. First, do populist politicians use social media more often to spread their messages? And second, do populist individuals consume political news from social media to a greater extent? This article looks to shed light on the latter, for which it puts together the concepts of populist attitudes, social media news use, and the "News Finds Me" perception (NFM). Studying this connection will help us explain why certain individuals are more prone to think that news will reach them without an active effort from their side, contribute to clarifying the levels and types of social media political engagement as a function of individuals´ populist attitudes, and improve our understanding of the electoral success of populist politicians that recur to social media to spread their political discourse.

Overall, empirical studies have found no straightforward relationship between populist attitudes and social media use in comparative terms (Jeroense et al., 2021; Schulz, 2019; Stier et al., 2020). While a general expectation existed that populist people will use social media more often, such theoretical assumption remains empirically elusive. Political communication findings point out the importance of considering different social media and different patterns of use to understand whether and how individuals ranking higher on populist attitudes use more social media, especially for news. Besides further exploring the general connection with new data, this article takes a step back and explores whether demand-side populism correlates with the perception that information will come from peers, often from social media, without much active effort involved. That is, with people's perception that they can remain well-informed about public affairs without actively seeking news, as the news will find them anyway through peers and social networks: NFM (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). For that, we ask about the association between populist attitudes and social media news use, hypothesize that the NFM perception should be higher for individuals who display stronger populist attitudes, and to complement our first question, explore whether our hypothesized relationship is mediated by general levels of social media news use.

To test our arguments, we build upon an original and demographically diverse survey data collected online in Italy and Portugal, two Southern European countries with a very different situation regarding supply-side populism. While relevant populist parties exist in Italy that compete from different places within the left–right axis (Caiani & Graziano, 2019), populism has not been so systematically used by political parties in Portugal, and it has been combined more often with left-wing ideologies (Gómez-Reino & Plaza-Colodro, 2018), at least until the appearance of CHEGA in 2019 (Rooduijn, 2019). More information about our case selection and its implications can be found in the data and methods section.

In line with previous research, we find no conclusive evidence for the association between populist attitudes and social media news in our analysis. However, we find a positive cross-country association between populist attitudes and NFM and support for a mediation mechanism between said variables. These results thus indicate a potential challenge for developing well-informed debates in contemporary societies, provided that NFM is associated with low levels of political learning (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017), and populist attitudes are widespread across countries (Kaltwasser & Van Hauwaert, 2020). Overall, our findings evidence that the association between demand-side populism and social media may be operating through more intricate pathways than initially expected. They advise for further research considering mediating mechanisms and reinforcing effects. Important in this regard is the dynamic effect of social media news use on the levels of political knowledge displayed by populist individuals and its potential consequences on voting.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Populist Attitudes and Social Media News Use

Although the literature on populism has experienced a boom in recent years (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018; Rooduijn, 2019), theoretical discussions around the term long predate more recent and more empirical scholarly efforts (Canovan, 2004; Ionescu & Gellner, 1969; Laclau, 2005). In fact, a wide range of definitions of populism exists (Aslanidis, 2015; Dornbusch & Edwards, 1991; Mudde, 2004; Weyland, 2001), each one with its own emphasis. This is well exemplified in early work by Ionescu and Gellner (1969), who spoke of an essentially *contested* term. However, nowadays, and while the situation has not reached an absolute definition convergence, there is a growing consensus around the ideational approach to populism, especially among political science scholars (Hawkins, Carlin, et al., 2019; Hawkins & Kaltwasser, 2017; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018).

The ideational approach considers populism as a set of ideas that emphasizes three core components: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and a Manichean outlook of politics (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al., 2019). A significant advantage of this ideational approach for empirical studies is that its emphasis on ideas allows considering populism as an ideology or a discourse (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2018). A second advantage, crucial for this research, is that populism can be gradually observed from both a demand- and a supply-side perspective. That is, parties and politicians may occupy a space in a continuum between populism and non-populism attending to their discourses, and citizens could also be located at some point of the continuum attending to their preferences regarding anti-elitism, people-centrism, and Manicheism. To put it into different words, populist discourses exist (supply-side), but so do populist attitudes (demand-side; Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al., 2019).

As scales to measure populist attitudes were refined (Akkerman et al., 2014; Hawkins et al., 2012; Schulz et al., 2018), so did our understanding of their causes and consequences. Populist attitudes have been associated with feelings of deprivation and declinism (Elchardus & Spruyt, 2016), anger (Rico et al., 2017), ideological radicalism (Marcos-Marne et al., 2021), and have been found to positively predict voting for populist parties (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al., 2019; Marcos-Marne, 2020; van Hauwaert & van Kessel, 2018). However, an ongoing and relevant discussion persists on the connections between populist attitudes and media use. This link is essential as, in the context of social media, the role of news may be to further divide the political realm and society into "us, the people," versus "them, the elites," supporting the way politicians and citizens negotiate important informational resources comprising both supply and demand facets of populism (see an edited volume on populism by Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020).

When looking at traditional media, populist attitudes have been associated with a higher likelihood of consuming news, primarily TV and tabloid ones (Schulz, 2019), which gives support to the idea that populist politics can actually be more sophisticated than initially thought (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Stanley & Cześnik, 2021; van Kessel et al., 2021).On the other hand, the relationship between populist attitudes and social media consumption seems far less clear (Jeroense et al., 2021; Müller & Schulz, 2021; Schulz, 2019; Stier et al., 2020).

A general expectation in this subfield was that populist individuals would use social media more often, especially to surveil political content, an idea built upon three main components (Jeroense et al., 2021). First, social media facilitates that people connect with like-minded individuals (Wells et al., 2020). Second, social media use speaks well to the dichotomy of people–elites, as it enables an informative space that is not so constrained by the agenda of mainstream media, often distrusted by populist individuals (Fawzi, 2019; Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Schulz et al., 2020). Third, populist politicians are often thought to use social media more systematically. Even if this is not unchallenged, the perception that this is true would be enough for populist individuals to turn to social media more frequently (Bucy et al., 2020). However, and as announced before, the general relationship between populist attitudes and social media use continues to remain elusive. Populist attitudes have been found to correlate negatively with social media political use in the Netherlands (Jeroense et al., 2021), and only positively with Facebook usage, rather than Twitter, in a comparative study of 11 countries (Schulz, 2019). Considering there is an interest in the accumulation of empirical material to be able to better understand the relationship described above, including evidence from less scrutinized countries as observations (i.e., Portugal and Italy), we ask again in this article:

RQ1: What is the association between people's populist attitudes and their frequency of social media use for news?

2.2. Populist Attitudes and News Finds Me Perception

While the general relationship between demand-side populism and social media is still contested, more populist individuals are nevertheless more likely to use "alternative media with an affinity to populism" (Müller & Schulz, 2021). This supports the expectation that social media news use of more populist individuals can be conditioned by how they perceive the media environment beyond traditional clear-cut divisions between digital and offline/mainstream sources (Stier et al., 2020). In essence, social media may not be a single homogeneous ecosystem that is consistently more often used by populist people, and different patterns of use with distinct effects may coexist within the general social media network. To shed additional light on the online news preferences of individuals with strong populist attitudes, we incorporate the concept of NFM.

NFM reflects the individuals' belief that "they can indirectly stay informed about public affairs through general internet use, information received from peers, and connections within online social networks" (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017, p. 3). As such, NFM has been theorized as a higher-order construct with three subdimensions: being informed (epistemic dimension), not-seeking (motivational dimension), and reliance on peers (instrumental dimension; Song et al., 2020). Often seen as a byproduct of media environments with many choices, high levels of NFM do not entail an active avoidance of news. Far from that, individuals ranking high on NFM are particularly receptive to new information gathered using social media, especially when this comes from peers (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2020). In fact, the NMF's instrumental dimension reflects that people believe they can delegate the acquisition of information to their online and social network peers (Song et al., 2020). It is here that we see the connection with populist attitudes.

First, regarding the instrumental and peer-reliance dimension of NFM, we expect that individuals with stronger populist attitudes will be more likely to agree with the NFM idea that they can rely on their peers to be well-informed. This is so because individuals displaying strong populist attitudes perceive the existence of a homogeneous and kind-hearted group of people that, just like them, are opposed to evil elites, and are more likely to distrust mainstream media (Fawzi, 2019; Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Schulz et al., 2020). Second, and tapping into the epistemic (being well-informed) and motivational (not-seeking) dimensions of NFM, we expect that individuals who agree with the Manichean and schematic understanding of politics inherent to populism will also resonate more strongly with the assumption that good/complete information is attainable without looking up for it at all. Therefore, we propose a framework of analysis that identifies key components of populism that are at the core of the NFM perception, expecting that levels of NFM will be influenced by the extent to which individuals agree with the anti-elitist, people-centered, and Manichean understanding of politics. Overall, we see the anti-elitism and people-centrism components of populism more clearly represented in the instrumental dimension of NFM, and the Manichean one in the epistemic and motivational dimensions. To be clear, we do not claim a single causal path between individuals´ populism and NFM, but rather a situation of elective affinity between them. Importantly, we believe populist attitudes will antecede NFM (and not the other way around) because of the general understanding of politics that populism entails, connected with the shortcomings of representative democracy (Canovan, 2004), and due to empirical research suggesting the relative stability of populist attitudes, even if they do not always have electoral consequences (Hawkins, Kaltwasser, et al., 2019; Marcos-Marne, 2021). Accordingly, we expect that:

H1: Individuals with stronger populist attitudes will display higher levels of NFM.

To finish this theoretical section, we also consider an additional aspect, which is whether the relationship between populist attitudes and NFM is mediated by social media news use. This is important because previous studies have found social media news use consistently predicts NFM. Individuals ranking high on NFM may be more likely to use social media but using social media for news is a stronger and more powerful predictor of NFM development, according to evidence from longitudinal studies (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Should we ignore this potential mediating mechanism, we might miss relevant information about the connection between social media news use and the demand-side populism. We expect that social media news use will positively mediate the effects of people's populist attitudes over the proliferation of NFM. However, due to the exploratory nature of our approach and looking to shed additional light on the relationship initially set in RQ1, we ask:

RQ2: Is the relationship between populist attitudes and NFM mediated by social media news use?

Overall, our theoretical framework considers literature from communication and political science to shed light on the informational practices of populist individuals. We do that by either asking innovative questions (direct and mediated effects of populist attitudes on NFM) or providing new empirical data to ongoing debates (populist attitudes and social media news use). We believe the responses to these questions will have important implications for at least two relevant lines of research. First, the implication for the role of offline characteristics (among which populist attitudes should be counted) in the levels and types of online political participation. Second, the electoral consequences of populist politicians entering social media, insofar as some of their potential voters might be more likely to be using non-traditional media to get informed.

3. Data and Methods

This study relies on original online survey data collected in Italy and Portugal during November 2020 by Netquest, an internet panel provider that works in agreement with the ISO Standard 26362 of panels in market, opinion, and social research. Our two samples (Italy n = 1,000; Portugal n = 1,055) were drawn aiming for representativeness, accounting for demographic key elements such as age, gender, and territorial location of respondents (quota sampling within an opt-in panel). While we are aware of the potential limitations of online surveys to obtain reliable population estimates, we also acknowledge that some of these issues are not unique to online procedures (e.g., participation biases are also found frequently in offline surveys; Wright, 2005). Furthermore, we focus our analysis on relationships between variables instead in obtaining population estimates, which would be more problematic if deviated samples were obtained (Baker et al., 2010). In short, we adhere to the idea that online surveys are no panacea for researchers. However, they can still be used successfully considering both the goals of each paper and the potential limitations attached. Bearing that in mind, we offer a comparison of key demographic features in our surveys and representative data from the census of the countries studied (Table 1).

Our variables, unless otherwise stated, are measured on 1 to 10 on a Likert scale. To minimize potential measurement error arising from missing data from some subjects, we used multiple imputation at the item-level before computing the final constructs of interest (Eekhout et al., 2014; Gottschall et al., 2012). To match the Likert scales, we set the minimum and maximum values per variable and rounded the final imputed values to 1 as constraints during the procedure. Only two variables in both countries suffered from above 10% missing cases: *Ideology* (Italy: 16.9%; Portugal 13.9%) and *Household Income* (Italy: 13.7%; Portugal: 11.9%), and both perform as controls in our analyses. Five imputations were generated in SPSS using the Markov chain Monte Carlo (MCMC) method (MacKay & Mac Kay, 2003;

Table 1. Comparison of our samples and country census considering the quota-sampling criteria.

	Italy		Portugal	
Variable	Our sample	Census	Our sample	Census
Sex (females)	52%	52%	45%	53%
Age (mean)	51	46	50	46
Education				
Less than primary, primary, and lower secondary education	48.6%	39.6%	47.6%	55%
Upper secondary, post-secondary non tertiary education	36.5%	42.8%	28.7%	23.8%
Tertiary education	14.9%	17.6%	23.7%	21.2%

Notes: Italy's census data collects people from the age of 15 and older. Our sample, from 18 and older. Sources: Istituto Nazionale di Statistica (n.d.); for Portugal's census data see Conselho Nacional de Educação (n.d.); Instituto Nacional de Estatística (n.d.).

Schafer, 1999). Guided by summaries on the missingness in the data and the imputation procedure, all analyses in Section 4 were conducted over the third imputation dataset.

3.1. Independent, Mediating and Criterion Variables

This study's independent variable of interest is *populist attitudes*. Following previous research (Akkerman et al., 2014; Silva et al., 2020), we utilized a six-item construct that averages respondents' agreement with the questions reported in Table 2, measured in a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (Italy: Cronbach's α = .82; M = 3.78; SD = 0.72; Portugal: α = .75; M = 3.71; SD = 0.70).

Social media news use is used as a dependent and mediating variable. To measure it, respondents were asked four questions about the frequency by which they use social media platforms to acquire news (Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, and others such as Instagram or YouTube) and a broader question asking for their general social media news use (Italy: Cronbach's α = .78; M = 4.93, SD = 2.35; Portugal: α = .77; M = 4.09, SD = 2.11).

NFM is the main criterion variable of the study. Following previous research (Gil de Zúñiga & Cheng, 2021; Song et al., 2020), we measured respondents' perception of being well-informed about current news and public affairs without any effort as the news will eventually reach them, by means of a six-item construct. This construct averages the following questions: "I rely on my friends to tell me what's important when news happens," "I can be well informed even when I don't actively follow the news," "I do not worry about keeping up with news because I know news will find me," "I rely on information from my friends based on what they like or follow through social media," "I do not have to actively seek news because when important public affairs break, they will get to me in social media," and "I'm up-to-date and informed about public affairs news, even when I do not actively seek news myself" (Italy: Cronbach's α = .81; M = 5.09; SD = 1.89; Portugal: α = .78; M = 4.88; SD = 1.68).

3.2. Control Variables

Regarding political antecedents, we controlled for *left–right ideology* (1 = left, 10 = right; Italy: M = 5.77, SD = 2.73; Portugal: M = 5.07, SD = 2.26), *political interest* (Italy: M = 2.57, SD = 0.86; Portugal: M = 2.67, SD = 0.79), and *political trust* (Italy: Cronbach's α = .89, M = 4.27, SD = 1.97; Portugal: α = .87, M = 4.38, SD = 1.77). The latter construct averages respondents' degree of trust in the following institutions: The "Parliament," the "political class," "political parties," "President of the Republic" (question not included in Portugal), "armed forces," and the "European Parliament." For media antecedents, we controlled for *traditional news use*, which averages respondents' use of TV, newspapers, radio, and online media for news (seven items in total; Italy: Cronbach's α = .79; M = 6.37, SD = 1.91; Portugal: α = .78; M = 6.14, SD = 1.78). Last, we controlled for a set of sociodemographic variables referring to respondents' *age*, *gender*, *education*, and *household income*.

To unravel the proposed theoretical connections, we conducted a set of hierarchical Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regressions, one per country (Italy and Portugal), and a third one with pooled data from both countries. Finally, we conducted a regression-based mediation analysis over the pooled data to estimate whether there is an indirect effect of the populist attitudes on the NFM perception via social media news use, while accounting for the control variables included in the OLS models. Mediation analysis was run with PROCESS macro, Model 4 in SPSS (Hayes, 2018).

3.3. Case Selection

To assess the explanatory power of our analytical model and the generalizability of our findings, we selected two

Table 2. Individual items for populist attitudes by country.

Populist Statements	Italy Mean (SD)	Portugal Mean (SD)
"The politicians in the Parliament need to follow the will of the people."	4.24 (0.82)	4.26 (0.87)
"The people, and not the politicians, should make the most important political decisions."	3.68 (1.08)	3.39 (1.22)
"I would rather be represented by an ordinary citizen than by a professional politician."	3.40 (1.17)	3.16 (1.21)
"The political differences between the elite and the people are larger than the differences among the people."	3.77 (0.92)	3.88 (1.01)
"Elected officials talk too much and take too little action."	4.24 (0.89)	4.24 (0.93)
"What people call 'compromise' in politics is really just selling out on one's principles."	3.38 (1.04)	3.35 (1.09)

Note: SD = Standard Deviation.

Southern European cases that clearly diverge in terms of their party system characteristics and the articulation of populist attitudes. After the demise of the First Republic, Italy witnessed the emergence and success of several political parties articulating populist discourses (Verbeek & Zaslove, 2016). Two of these parties, the M5S and the Lega, became the two most voted for parties in the 2018 general elections, and they even managed to build a coalition government that lasted until 2021 (D'Alimonte, 2019). By contrast, in Portugal, the traditional party system showed a striking resilience in the face of the Great Recession. Mainstream center-right and center-left political parties remained the central players in the Portuguese party system and continued to play dominant roles in national and regional political institutions. Furthermore, as previous comparative analyses have shown, Portuguese political parties failed to articulate strong populist discursive elements (Lisi & Borghetto, 2018). Therefore, Portugal and Italy present the most extreme and contrasting positions in terms of populist activation and party system change among Southern European countries. By analyzing these two very different countries, we can assess the degree to which the associations we are putting to test are context-dependent or stable across cases. Furthermore, we think that the inclusion of the Portuguese case provides our study with additional analytical leverage. We simply cannot discard the possibility that a low level of activation of populist political discourses limits the associations between populist attitudes and the informative uses of social media: Populist political discourses do not merely concern electoral competition and party-voter linkages, but they are also related to a wider set of social behaviors and cultural orientations. More specifically, to the extent that populist political discourses shape and interact with other social attitudes, we could expect Portugal to have a lower probability of displaying a structured pattern of association between populist attitudes, social media news use, and NFM. Finding empirical evidence of any or all these associations in this less-likely case would therefore render strong support for the generalizability of the expectations that guide this article.

4. Results

The results of our first OLS regression model (Table 3) show that individuals with stronger populist attitudes tend to consume more news in social media in Italy ($\beta = .065$, $p < .05$). The coefficient for populist attitudes almost reaches statistical significance in the pooled models ($\beta = .042$, $p < .10$), and the relationship does not reach statistical significance in Portugal ($\beta = .007$, $p > .10$). Therefore, and in line with previous research, we find no clear connection between populist attitudes and social media news use that is consistent across countries (RQ1). To delve into this relationship, we tested whether populist attitudes would predict news use on any social media platforms included in our construct

Table 3. OLS regression Model 1—predicting social media news use.

	Social Media News Use		
Predictors	Italy	Portugal	Pooled Countries
Block 1: Demographics			
Sex (female = 1)	.073**	.035	.070***
Age	−.181***	−.228***	−.198***
Education	−.039	−.030	−.058**
Household Income	−.115***	−.054	−.042
ΔR^2	3.3%	2.9%	2.5%
Block 2: Political Antecedents			
Ideology	.077*	.033	.080**
Political Trust	.049	−.008	.022
Political Interest	.034	.057	.028
ΔR^2	2.5%	1.6%	1.9%
Block 3: Media Antecedents			
Trad. News Use	.307***	.277***	.302***
ΔR^2	8.2%	6.6%	7.9%
Block 4: Variable of Interest			
Populist Attitudes	.065*	.007	.042#
ΔR^2	0.3%	0.00%	0.1%
Total R^2	14.2%	11.1%	12.5%

Notes: Sample size: Italy = 1,000; Portugal = 1,055; pooled countries = 2,055. Cell entries are OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients. # $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$; *** $p < .001$.

(results provided in Table 4), using the same controls as in Table 3 (Model 1). In line with previous research, we find that stronger populist attitudes predict a more frequent use of Facebook for news (β = .09, p < .001). Conversely, the relationship between populist attitudes and Twitter use for news is negative (β = −.053, p < .05).

Results included in Table 5, Model 2 (M2) evidence the existing connection between populist attitudes and NFM (H1). Individuals ranking higher on populist attitudes show greater levels of NFM using data from Italy (β = .125, p < .001, total R^2 = 12.3%), Portugal (β = .063, p < .05, total R^2 = 11.6%), and the pooled model (β = .096, p < .001). Among the controls, we see a consistent positive effect of political trust (β = .116, p < .001; more trusting individuals rank higher on NFM) and social media news use (β = .268, p < .01; using more social media for news predicts higher levels of NFM). Political interest negatively predicts NFM (β = −.126, p = .001), denoting that those more interested in politics will not share that the news will find them without active

Table 4. OLS regressions—predicting SM platforms.

	Pooled Countries			
Predictors	Facebook	Twitter	WhatsApp	Other SM platforms
Populist Attitudes	.09***	−.053*	.024	.02
ΔR^2	0.7%	0.2%	0%	0%
Total R^2	6%	5.4%	7.4%	9.9%
Controls	✓	✓	✓	✓

Notes: Sample size: 2,055. Cell entries are OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients. # p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

Table 5. OLS regression Models 2 and 3—predicting News Finds Me perception.

	News Finds Me Perception					
Predictors	Italy (M2)	Italy (M3)	Portugal (M2)	Portugal (M3)	Pooled Countries (M2)	Pooled Countries (M3)
Block 1: Demographics						
Sex (female = 1)	−.027	−.033	−.035	−.057#	−.028	−.039#
Age	.131***	.121***	−.089***	−.070*	−.021	−.025
Education	−.095**	−.096***	−.019	−.006	−.033	−.029
Household Income	−.003	−.013	−.019	−.021	−.018	−.022
ΔR^2	2.9%	2.9%	2.6%	2.6%	0.6%	0.6%
Block 2: Political Antecedents						
Ideology	.072*	.072*	.013	.031	.051*	.060**
Political Trust	.098**	.102**	.115***	.121***	.116***	.120***
Political Interest	−.111**	−.103**	−.129***	−.117***	−.126***	−.120***
ΔR^2	1.9%	1.9%	1.5%	1.5%	2%	2%
Block 3: Media Antecedents						
Trad. News Use	−.049	−.063#	−.043	−.072*	−.049*	−.063**
SM News Use (5 items)	.258***	—	.280***	—	.275***	—
SM News Use (1 item)	—	.131**	—	.246***	—	.177***
Facebook	—	.111**	—	.033	—	.090**
Twitter	—	.092**	—	−.065*	—	.024
WhatsApp	—	.094*	—	.051	—	.076**
Others	—	−.059	—	.095*	—	.012
ΔR^2	6.3%	7.5%	7.1%	9.9%	7%	8.3%
Block 4: Variable of Interest						
Populist Attitudes	.125***	.121***	.063*	.050	.096***	.089***
ΔR^2	1.3%	1.2%	0.3%	0.2%	0.8%	0.6%
Total R^2	12.3%	13.5%	11.6%	14.3%	10.4%	11.6%

Notes: Sample size: Italy = 1,000; Portugal = 1,055; pooled countries = 2,055. Cell entries are OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients. # p < .10; * p < .05; ** p < .01; *** p < .001.

implication from their side. Consistent with prior studies, traditional news use is also negatively related to NFM ($\beta = -.049$, $p < .05$), meaning that those who consume news on TV, radio, and newspapers (online and offline) tend to believe less that the news will find them with no active effort. Social media news and traditional news use are rigorous controls for the relationship proposed, as they are strong predictors of NFM (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017). Figure 1 provides a graphical representation of the results.

Finally, mediation analysis over pooled data reveals an indirect effect of populist attitudes on the NFM through social media news use (5 items, $\beta = .029$, *se* = .017, 95% *CI* = [.002–.059]). Figure 2 shows the direct and indirect paths, based on the OLS regression unstandardized coefficients reported by PROCESS macro (Hayes,

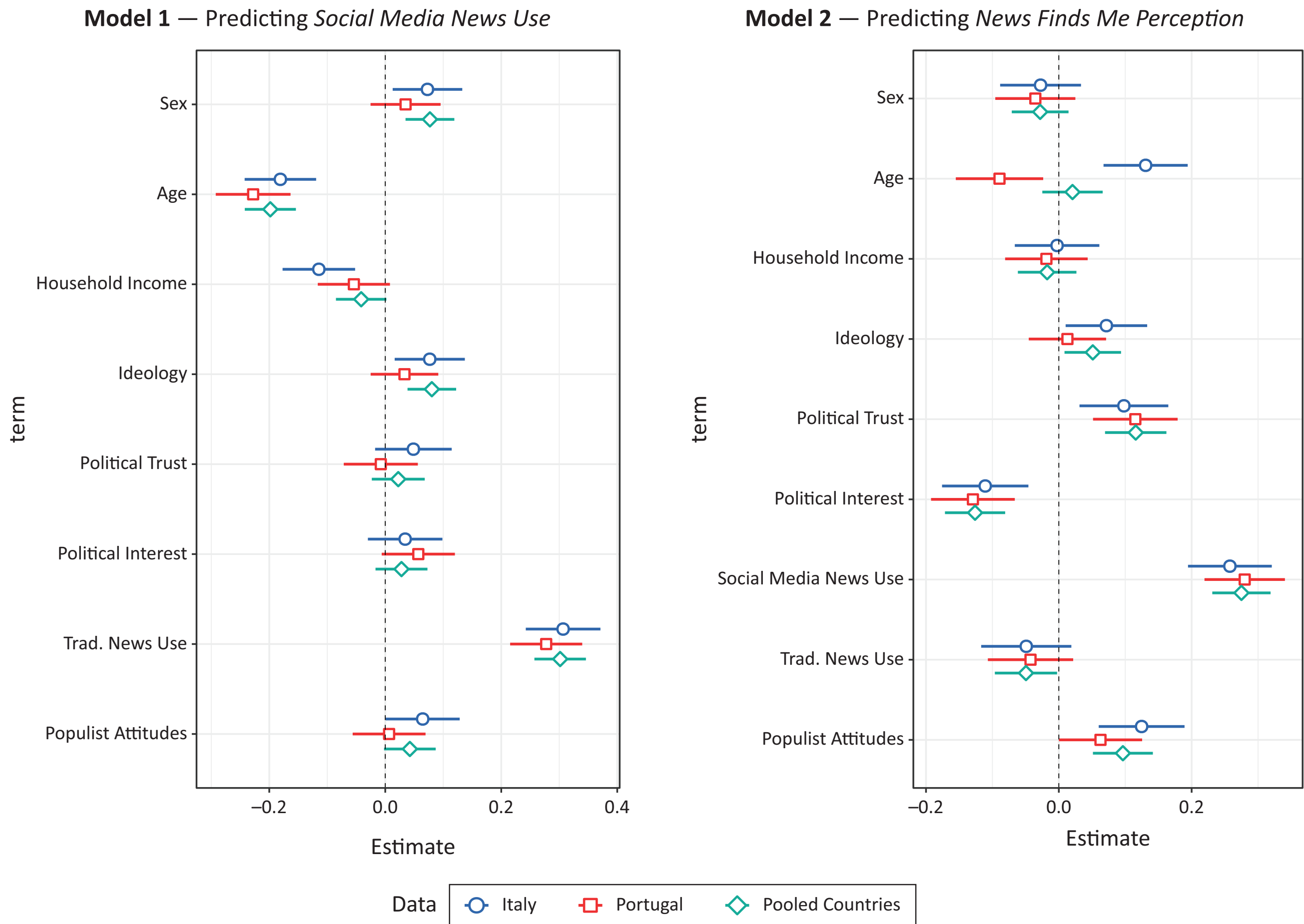

Figure 1. Visualization for OLS regressions in Italy, Portugal, and pooled countries' data. Note: Figure is based on the OLS standardized Beta (β) coefficients (95% Confidence Interval) from Tables 3 and 5.

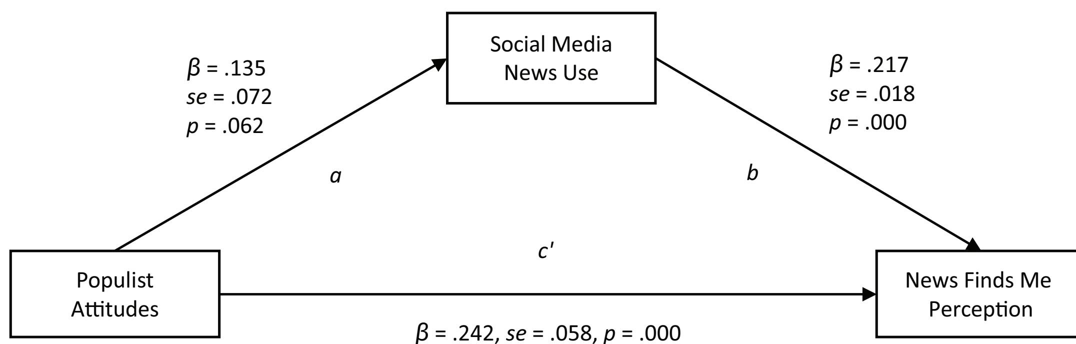

Figure 2. Mediation analysis for Portugal and Italy pooled data. Notes: Sample size = 2,055. Path cells are unstandardized coefficients. Bootstrap samples for *CI*: 5,000 simulations. The model includes the same controls and predictors as Model 2 (Table 5). The point estimate of the *indirect effect* (a × b) is .029, *se* = .017, 95% *CI* = [.002–.059]; and of the *total effect* (c) is .272, *se* = .060, 95% *CI* = [.173–.370]. *CI* = confidence interval.

2018). The mediating mechanism can be read as people reporting populist attitudes further consume news in social media, which in turn explains the proliferation of NFM. Having populist attitudes positively relates to NFM, directly and indirectly. Table 6 provides a report on the mediation analyses conducted using each social media platform as a mediator variable. An indirect effect can be found with social media news use (1 item, β = .039, *se* = .016, 95% *CI* = [.007–.072]) and Facebook (β = .054, *se* = .016, 95% *CI* = [.024–.086]).

5. Discussion and Conclusion

While initial theoretical expectations existed about a clear-cut relationship between populist attitudes and social media news use, this connection has proved to be more complex than expected. Individuals displaying stronger populist attitudes tend to use social media for news more often only in some countries and/or depending on the specific platforms considered as social media sources. Our results for RQ1 are in line with these findings, as we find a significant relationship in one of the countries (Italy) but not in Portugal nor in the pooled model. A possible explanation for it is the broad range of motivations behind social media news use, which is far from exclusive of populist individuals. However, it might also be a consequence of different understandings of social media, not all of which are along the lines of anti-elitism and people-centrism. In a nutshell, the antecedents and understandings of social media are likely to be too rich to be exhausted by the populist-social media connection.

Taking this into account and looking for a better understanding of how populist individuals interact with online environments, we hypothesized a positive association between populist attitudes and NFM. This relationship taps into the foundations of the populist–social media connection, as it combines anti-elitism, people-centrism, and the Manichean outlook. Still, it is more specific and seems to better refer to demand-side populism alone. In line with it, we find a positive association between populist attitudes and NFM that works in all tested models (Italy, Portugal, and the pooled model), confirming H1. Notably, the effect remains even after controlling for powerful predictors of NFM such as demographics, political antecedents, and social media and traditional news use. Furthermore, in response to RQ2, we find that part of the association between populist attitudes and NFM is mediated by social media news use, which indicates the effects of populist attitudes on social media use may be less direct than initially expected. In fact, such a mediating mechanism entails that populist individuals who use social media for news could develop the perception that the news will find them. While this is true for any social media user, populist attitudes seem to increase the chances of developing a "passive" way of approaching the consumption of new information, which might foster a misperception of how one is informed, followed by a decrease in political knowledge and/or interest (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019). In a nutshell,

Table 6. Mediation analysis—Comparison between social media platforms.

Mediator	Beta	*SE*	95% *CI*
Social Media News Use (5 items)			
Direct Effect	.242	.058	.147–.339
Indirect Effect	.029	.017	.002–.059
Social Media News Use (1 item)			
Direct Effect	.233	.058	.119–.347
Indirect Effect	.039	.016	.007–.072
Facebook			
Direct Effect	.217	.058	.103–.332
Indirect Effect	.054	.016	.024–.086
Twitter			
Direct Effect	.286	.060	.169–.403
Indirect Effect	−.015	.008	−.033–.000
WhatsApp			
Direct Effect	.262	.059	.146–.377
Indirect Effect	.016	.011	−.010–.032
Other SM platforms			
Direct Effect	.263	.059	.148–.379
Indirect Effect	.008	.011	−.012–.030

Notes: N = 2,055. Unstandardized coefficients. *CI* = Confidence Interval. Significance level = 95%.

populist attitudes seem to condition how social media news is consumed, rather than the absolute amount. This distinct engagement with politics on social media that more populist individuals show may have relevant consequences that translate into the offline realm, too (crucially, on different forms of political behavior).

Our article is a first attempt to explore the association between populist attitudes and NFM. By doing that, it contributes to a larger stream of literature revolving around the populism–social media connection. However, our approach does not come without limitations, and four main aspects must be mentioned here. First, we build upon the operationalization of populist attitudes by Akkerman et al. (2014). While this is among the most widespread measures of populist attitudes in social sciences, and despite its theoretical and empirical usefulness (Silva et al., 2020), it is not the only operationalization available. As differences exist depending on how populist attitudes are measured (Silva et al., 2020), further studies will be needed to confirm our results. Second, our comparative study focuses on two countries of Southern Europe. We believe our main findings should hold with data for other countries, but that remains a theoretical conjecture until further cross-cultural studies empirically confirm it. Third, we theorize a causal path from populist attitudes to social media news use and NFM, but mutual reinforcing dynamics likely exist between these variables. Since our findings are drawn upon cross-sectional data, we cannot empirically ascertain the direction of the relationship. Studies using longitudinal data will be particularly useful to put our assumptions and results to an additional empirical test. Lastly, our indicators of social media news use consider respondents' frequency of use but do not capture nuances regarding the type of news. Further studies considering this variation will not only matter to satisfy academic curiosity. In fact, understanding populists' media diets is of the highest relevance to unravel the democratic consequences of widespread populist attitudes.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited).

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Article

Empowering the People's Truth Through Social Media? (De)Legitimizing Truth Claims of Populist Politicians and Citizens

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Abstract

Right-wing populists have allegedly fueled increasing levels of distrust regarding expert knowledge and empirical evidence. Yet, we know little about how right-wing populist politicians and citizens use social media to construct and oppose truth claims. Using a qualitative analysis of Twitter and Facebook posts communicated by right-wing populists and citizens supporting populist ideas in the Netherlands, this article offers in-depth insights into processes of legitimization (confirming truth claims) and de-legitimization (opposing truth claims). The main conclusion is that right-wing populists and citizens supporting populism do not share a universal way of referring to reality. They use social media to communicate a confirmation-biased reality: Expert knowledge and evidence are de-contextualized or reinterpreted and aligned with right-wing populist agendas. References to the people's experiences and worldviews, conspiracy theories and crisis sentiments are used to legitimize people's opposition to expert knowledge and empirical evidence. Based on these findings, we coin the idea of an "adaptable construction of confirmation-biased truth claims" central in right-wing populist interpretations of reality. In times of increasing attacks on expert knowledge and empirical evidence, populist discourse may fuel an antagonism between the ordinary people's experiences and the truth claims of established media channels and politicians in government. Social media offer a platform to members of the public to engage in discussions about (un)truthfulness, perceived deception, and populist oppositions—potentially amplifying divides between the ordinary people's experiences and expert sources.

Keywords

disinformation; fake news; misinformation; populism; right-wing populism; social media; truthfulness

Issue

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1. Introduction

Populist ideas, which revolve around the construction of an antagonistic narrative emphasizing the divide between the "good" ordinary people and the "corrupt" elite (Mudde, 2004), are very prominent on social media. Social media have empowered populist politicians and citizens with populist worldviews to express their viewpoints directly, and to avoid the elite channels of communication they tend to distrust (Engesser et al., 2017). Populism's antagonism has an important, yet largely unexplored epistemic dimension: Right-wing populist (RWP) ideas oftentimes oppose the reality constructions of established media, political, and scientific institutions (Mede & Schäfer, 2020) whilst replacing the elite's interpretation of the truth and reality with alternative facts or experiences of ordinary people (Harambam & Aupers, 2015). Responding to developments toward increasing distrust in the mainstream media, cultivated and amplified by RWP actors (Waisbord, 2018), the mainstream media and scientific actors are increasingly regarded as part of the "corrupt" elite who is not listening to the voice of the people when creating knowledge or when analysing issues (e.g., Mede & Schäfer, 2020). In this

setting, this article seeks to answer the question of how social media may empower both political actors and citizens with an affinity for populist worldviews to express their perspective on truth and knowledge in an antagonistic manner (also see e.g., Krämer et al., 2021).

The central concepts we focus on in this article are the legitimization versus de-legitimization of truth claims. We understand the legitimization of truth claims as the arguments and evidence forwarded to justify certain perspectives on reality. The de-legitimization of truth claims can be understood as a rejection or refutation of the truth claims made by opposed actors—a discourse that resonates with the "fake news" accusations voiced by RWP actors (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Waisbord, 2018). Together, the dynamics of legitimization and de-legitimization may contribute to an antagonistic populist reality construction: Claims that are congruent with people's beliefs are justified and defended, whereas opposed claims are rejected or counter-argued. This resonates with the conceptualization of partisanship as a social identity (e.g., West & Iyengar, 2020), which presupposes that people's support for an ideology or political party is internalized as a social identity. In-group favoritism and out-group hostility are central to the construction of such identities, which we extrapolate to the construction of truth claims in online populist discourse. In this context, the truth claims of people's in-group may be seen as honest and accurate, whereas the truth claims expressed by out-groups are seen as dishonest or even deceptive. In this setting, we introduce the following research questions:

> RQ1: To what extent and how does populist rhetoric afforded by social media de-legitimize and oppose elite actors whilst introducing counternarratives within the same traditions of authoritative knowledge?

> RQ2: To what extent and how is populism expressed via social media opposing the principles of expert-based and empirically founded knowledge?

To answer these research questions, this study relies on a qualitative content analysis of Twitter and Facebook pages in the Netherlands. We focus on the Twitter pages of RWP actors to better understand how discourses of (de)legitimization are constructed by antagonistic political actors who have been associated with hostile attacks on the legitimacy of the media, scientists, and political elites (e.g., Waisbord, 2018). We subsequentially analyse Facebook pages of ordinary citizens who support these populist actors and their ideas. Although populism is thin in the ideology it conveys (Mudde, 2004), we specifically look at right-wing populism in this article because these sentiments and political actors are more prominent in the Dutch context. Here, we rely on an in-depth analysis of 200 posts on each platform to assess how references to the truth are expressed and opposed. With our focus on ordinary citizens as communicators of (de)legitimizing discourses and populism, we aim to better understand how the affordances of social media that promote interaction, political participation, and deliberation empower members of the public to construct antagonistic narratives on reality in a context of growing relativism toward (scientific) facts.

Theoretically, this article aims to make an important contribution to the literature exploring how right-wing populism refers to truth, knowledge, and deception (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Mede & Schäfer, 2020; Waisbord, 2018). By analysing the social media expressions of both RWP politicians and citizens supporting such worldviews, we illustrate how social media empower both political actors and members of the public to express antagonistic narratives on reality—herewith potentially contributing to an amplification of societal divides based on divergent perspectives on the truth. Hence, considering the potential of social media to express confirmation-biased truth claims in the context of social support from like-minded community members, political dialogue may be hampered. This is at odds with the principles of a well-functioning deliberative democracy: If people express one-sided truth claims in homogenous communities without listening to the other side, divergent ideas on what the truth entails may become further apart to the point of epistemic polarization.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Populist Rhetoric and the Construction of (Counter-)knowledge

Populism stresses an antagonistic divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elites (e.g., Canovan, 1999; Jagers & Walgrave, 2007). Populist ideas frame the ordinary people as a relatively deprived in-group, which has a common will that is not represented by the elites. The elites, in turn, are seen as responsible for failing to represent the ordinary people (Hameleers et al., 2017). This ideational core of populism may be expressed to various extents by different (political) actors (Busby et al., 2019). In this article, we aim to understand how this antagonism central to populism relates to the construction of knowledge, truth-claims, and de-legitimizing discourses targeted at the media, experts, and scientists—discourses found to be central in RWPs' construction of (counter-)knowledge (e.g., Krämer et al., 2021; Ylä-Anttila, 2018).

Mede and Schäfer (2020) coined the term "science-related populism" to describe populism's understanding of science. Science-related populism holds that the ordinary people are constructed as a virtuous in-group that is framed in opposition to "evil" scientific elites. The elite's version of reality is deemed illegitimate and (intentionally) misleading, whereas the people are said to be endowed with truth-speaking sovereignty (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). In line with this notion of populism's

epistemic antagonism, populist rhetoric is known to de-legitimize scientific consensus and the objectivity of expert knowledge. This allegedly confounded knowledge is replaced with issue-consistent "counter" or "alternative" knowledge (Harambam & Aupers, 2015; Ylä-Anttila, 2018). Science-related populism includes popular demands for science-related decision-making sovereignty, which means that the people (and not the academic elite) are seen as a legitimate source of scientific decision-making: Their ideas about true knowledge are allegedly not biased by ideological interests or corruption (Mede & Schäfer, 2020)—which means that they should have the power to formulate truth claims related to science. Krämer et al. (2021) found empirical support for such populist constructions of reality on social media: Users with an affinity for right-wing populism cultivated distrust in established knowledge and, at the same time, emphasized the merits of alternative authorities and evidence. Using a mixed-methods analysis of far-right Twitter networks in Brazil, Oliveira et al. (2021) reveal how users selectively use ideologically aligned sources to substantiate truth claims and conspiracies on Covid-19. Their findings also reveal how far-right leaders and their supporters create a moral discourse in which the "virtuous ordinary people" are pitted against a "corrupt" academic elite—discourses of legitimization and de-legitimization that resonate strongly with the principles of science-related populism (Mede & Schäfer, 2020).

The question remains how fundamental populism's antagonistic relationship to the established truth actually is. Two positions can be forwarded. First, Harambam and Aupers (2015) suggest that populism does not necessarily oppose scientific institutions and the techniques or modes of truth-seeking used by the established order. Just like populism may not simply be dismissed as undemocratic or a system-level rejection of politics (e.g., Canovan, 1999), populist rhetoric may emphasize that the current elites claiming authority on defining truthfulness and valid empirical evidence are corrupt, and therefore need to be replaced with alternative authorities and counter-knowledge. As an example, many interpretations that framed Covid-19 during the 2020 pandemic as "fake news" or failing policy did not reject the ideas of science and empirical evidence, but emphasized that elite sources had to be replaced by other knowledge sources—such as alternative doctors, health experts, and alternative "unbiased" sources of verified knowledge.

An alternative perspective on populist knowledge systematically rejects scientific techniques. Saurette and Gunster (2011) used the term "epistemological populism" to describe the populist replacement of scientific principles with people-centric evidence and experiences. This perspective implies that, to understand reality, one cannot rely on expert knowledge or empirical evidence: Such accounts are too far-removed from the worlds and experiences of the people—and therefore illegitimate claims of truthfulness. An example of this perspective is the claim emphasized in conspiracies stating that Covid-19 is "nothing but a bad flu" substantiated by arguments that people do not know anyone who actually had this virus, and those that might have had it, experienced only the symptoms of a normal flu. Common sense, then, is used to substantiate the alternative interpretation that we do not really face a threat.

In the context of these two perspectives, this article explores how populist politicians and citizens supporting populist ideas express truth claims. Here, we specifically focus on how truth claims are constructed to (de)legitimize a congruent narrative. Legitimization is understood here as the different ways in which evidence and arguments are used to substantiate and justify an identity-congruent perspective on reality. De-legitimization, in contrast, refers to the rhetoric used to oppose the positions and statements of other parties or out-groups. This understanding of legitimization and de-legitimization aligns with partisanship as a social identity (see e.g., West & Iyengar, 2020). Truth claims of the in-group are legitimized, whereas the truth claims from out-groups are de-legitimized. This is also supported by the findings of Oliveira et al. (2021), who found that discourses of far-right leaders and their followers revolved around the legitimization of scientists' knowledge sources that supported their ideological values, and the de-legitimization of opposed evidence and expert knowledge.

2.2. Populist Constructions of Truth and Knowledge on Social Media

Social media platforms may amplify populist rhetoric as they allow for the circumvention of elite actors whilst directly addressing the ordinary people (Engesser et al., 2017). The technological possibilities of social media and populist ideas thus align: Online platforms can enable the circumvention of elite actors whilst also allowing political actors to signal closeness to the people by using the same channels and styles of communication as members of the public. The affinity between populism and social media can also be understood as the possibilities of direct representation offered by social media (Gerbaudo, 2018): Social media give a voice to people and politicians who claim to be underrepresented and silenced by the established order.

Similar to Gerbaudo's (2018) analysis of an affinity between social media and populist expressions, Hopster (2021) distinguishes four affordances of social media that enable populist communication. Here, affordances can be understood as the ways in which the technological setting of social media offers the opportunity for people to behave in specific ways (e.g., Bucher & Helmond, 2018). Applying this perspective, Hopster (2021) argues that four affordances in particular may explain the affinity between social media and populism: (a) the ability to circumvent journalistic gatekeepers and editorial filters (also see Engesser et al., 2017); (b) the

algorithmic amplification of dramatized and sensational claims; (c) the option to use populist communication styles, such as simplistic and emotional language; and (d) the ability to express and monitor the people's general will in real time. Extrapolating these affordances to the populist construction of knowledge and reality, especially the option to circumvent journalistic gatekeepers and the ability to directly refer to and represent the people's voice and experiences are relevant to consider. Using social media platforms, populist leaders and citizens with populist worldviews can create and disseminate truth claims based on the ordinary people's experiences and common sense, sidestepping the analyses and expert sources they distrust and oppose (e.g., Fawzi, 2019; Waisbord, 2018). Social media may thus offer supportive channels for the alternative truth claims and knowledge constructions central in populist discourse: These alternative and antagonistic constructions of reality can be disseminated to members of the public via unfiltered channels, and the absence of gatekeepers means that the hostile attacks on "fake news" media, scientists, and experts can reach the ordinary people directly.

Next to these affordances, social media may offer a context for people to seek out evidence and truth claims that confirm their existing views on the truth (Waisbord, 2018). Although we can assume that not all citizens are trapped in online filter bubbles, RWP supporters in particular are likely to seek shelter in likeminded online communities: They tend to perceive the mainstream media as an "enemy of the people" (Fawzi, 2019), experience belonging to an in-group of deprived ordinary citizens that is allegedly not represented by the established order, and prefer alternative (online) information platforms that confirm their prior anti-establishment views. The high levels of distrust in the mainstream media and political institutions experienced by RWP supporters may explain their attraction to online media platforms that function as "imagined" communities for their populist discontent (Hameleers, 2020).

3. Research Design

3.1. Research focus and Questions

The specific nature of (right-wing) populist constructions of antagonistic truth claims lies at the heart of this article. Reasoned from the perspective that social media offer an ungated platform that empowers politicians and citizens to define, legitimize, and de-legitimize (opposed) truth claims, we seek to advance our understanding of the epistemic dimensions of online populist communication. To recap, we raise the following research questions to map the discursive construction of truth and un-truths in populists' social media discourse:

> RQ1: To what extent and how does populist rhetoric afforded by social media de-legitimize and oppose elite actors whilst introducing counternarratives within the same traditions of authoritative knowledge?

> RQ2: To what extent and how is populism expressed via social media opposing the principles of expert-based and empirically founded knowledge?

3.2. Context and National Setting

These two questions are answered in the context of the social media expressions of RWP politicians and citizens in the Netherlands: a country with a multiparty system in which right-wing populism has been electorally successful for multiple decades (e.g., Aalberg et al., 2017). In this country, we specifically look at the Twitter communication of two prototypical RWP politicians: Geert Wilders from the Dutch Freedom Party and Thierry Baudet from the RWP party Forum for Democracy (Rooduijn et al., 2019). We contrast these actors' political communication to the populist ideas expressed by supporters of these parties on Facebook community pages that revolve around RWP support. We selected 50 posts of each sub-group (two Facebook and two Twitter profiles), which means that the qualitative findings are not directly generalizable to all populist leaders or citizens with populist attitudes. It thus remains an empirical question how well the findings travel to other settings, although we believe that the general logic distinguishing between the legitimization and de-legitimization of truth claims is relevant across the globe.

4. Methods

We used Twitter's API to scrape relevant Tweets posted by the two political actors in the Netherlands. As most (political) communication revolved around the Covid-19 pandemic from March 2020 onward, we decided to use a more diverse sample of Tweets in the period before the pandemic in the Netherlands and compare this period with a sample of Tweets posted in the midst of the pandemic. To this end, we collected an initial sample of 50 Tweets of both politicians in the pre- and post-Covid-19 period (N = 200). To make sure that the two sample frames are equal in size, we use a six-months period before the salience of Covid-19 in the political and media debate (July 2019–December 2019) and contrast this to a similar time-period after the crisis erupted (March 2020–August 2020). To avoid a selection bias in the initial sample of Tweets, we randomly selected 50 Tweets for all cells of the sample frame. In line with the principles of the Grounded Theory approach (e.g., Glaser & Strauss, 1967), the initial sample was first fully analysed before collecting new data. As saturation was achieved (i.e., the in-depth analyses of the additional Tweets did not uncover additional variety in the established themes and categories), we did not oversample Tweets after this additional round of data collection.

A similar approach was taken for the Facebook pages of citizens supporting the two politicians and their populist ideology: We focus on the same time periods and use the same sample size (50 posts in each cell). We decided to focus on Facebook for citizens' populist discourse as this platform is more likely to be used by citizens with populist attitudes than Twitter (a more unidirectional platform for elite communication, also see e.g., Valenzuela et al., 2018). Hence, citizens with populist attitudes are found to rely more on Facebook for their political information needs (Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Schulz et al., 2020), whereas Facebook and Twitter are both associated with the populist communication of political actors. In the context of this study, the Netherlands, Twitter is the most likely channel to be used by populist politicians (e.g., Jacobs & Spierings, 2019). On Facebook community pages, we analysed how citizens supporting the populist leaders constructed truth claims in terms of legitimizing a reality supporting their in-group as well as opposing the truth claims of out-groups they did not identify with (i.e., elite actors in media and politics). Although Twitter affords one-directional communication, ordinary citizens themselves are more likely to express their views on Facebook community pages. As we were interested in how members of the public are empowered to construct truth claims and antagonistic narratives via social media in the context of right-wing populism, we focus on Facebook pages that offer a forum or "imagined community" for people supporting populist actors and ideas. As saturation check, and to explore the exhaustiveness of our themes, we additionally looked at reactions to Twitter posts and additional timeframes. We herewith avoided a platform bias in our findings. The additional analyses that looked at direct responses to the Twitter posts by the two politicians confirmed the findings found in the Facebook posts. Yet, there was less richness in the Twitter comments, and the themes mainly reflected a simple agreement with the truth claims of the RWP actors in our sample.

4.1. Analyses

The tweets were analysed based on a combination of discourse analysis (e.g., Van Dijk, 1993) and the coding steps of the Grounded Theory approach. Sensitizing concepts—analytical categories that gave direction to the labelling and coding of relevant segments of data—were based on theoretical definitions of misinformation (e.g., Vraga & Bode, 2020) and truth claims (Brewer, 2011). More specifically, within (de)legitimizing discourses, we selectively coded segments of Tweets that referred to any type of (expert) knowledge, evidence or other (relative) constructions of truths and untruths. All relevant segments were arced and coded further using the software package Atlas.ti. With this tool, we subsequentially applied open, selective (focused) and axial coding steps. These coding steps were documented in Atlas.ti. During open coding, all relevant segments of the data were described and labeled in an open-ended way (i.e., fake news accusations targeted at mainstream media channels). During the second step of focused coding, lists of unique open codes were merged, grouped and detached from their context (i.e., de-legitimizing labels to attack the mainstream media). Finally, during axial coding, linkages between the higher-order themes and categories were identified. Peer debriefing was used as a validation and reliability check suited for the nature of the interpretative analyses and qualitative data: A second independent coder followed and checked all data reduction steps and independently used the open codes to construct themes—discrepancies between researchers were assessed until complete agreement was reached.

5. Results of the Analysis of Right-Wing Populist Politicians' Tweets

5.1. Right-Wing Populists' De-Legitimization of Established Knowledge and Evidence

The populist divide between the ordinary people and the corrupt elite oftentimes included an attack on the legitimacy and honesty of the elites. Explicit references to "fake news" and "lying media" were frequently expressed by both leaders, and especially used to de-legitimize issue positions or political actors incongruent with RWP agendas. The context of these labels thus mattered: They were strategically placed to attack positions, expert sources, and evidence when facts were inconvenient, and incongruent with radical RWP ideas (i.e., climate change, pro-immigration positions).

Wilders explicitly attacked the Prime Minister for deceiving the Dutch people. Tweets oftentimes contained a visual or meme depicting the Prime Minister with the label "liar" or showing a long nose to illustrate deception. The media were also attacked and accused of lying to the public. The de-legitimization of the press was mostly addressed to the public broadcaster: "Can we lynch the NOS [public broadcaster] and the rest of the lying media? It will be my pleasure to terminate the public broadcasters." Wilders also expressed the advice to not watch programs of the public broadcaster, as they were allegedly filled with political correctness and self-hatred, which was deemed dishonest. Although Wilders oftentimes voiced an explicit attack on the mainstream media (the public broadcaster) and the established political order (the Prime Minister or elite actors in government) for intentionally deceiving or lying to the people, he did not explicitly de-legitimize evidence or expert knowledge.

The explicit de-legitimization of elitist interpretations was much more salient in the discourse of Thierry Baudet. Just like Wilders, mainstream media and public broadcasters were accused of spreading "fake news." However, moving beyond this de-legitimizing label, Baudet blamed

platforms, such as YouTube, for worrisome levels of censorship: "Unbelievable that YouTube banned philosopher Stefan Molyneux without any warning and without any clear reason. The censorship starts to take on extremely worrisome proportions." Baudet directed his de-legitimizing attack to platforms and sources that allegedly censored critique or propagated the (dishonest) views of the established order. He also raised a sense of urgency and fearmongering by referring to impediments on the freedom of speech and safety caused by the elitist press: "Criticism on the elites is apparently not allowed. Who of us is still safe and free? What discussions can we still hold? This has to stop!" Next to the media and platforms, Baudet targeted experts and scientists allegedly part of the "dishonest" elite in his populist anti-establishment rhetoric. He even accused universities of actively pushing activist or radical political agendas: "The politicization of the experts. A real problem. Universities with an activist agenda, who are pushing radical ideas and circumventing alternative voices whilst sailing under the flag of 'science' or 'neutral' expertise." Answering RQ1, Wilders did not oppose principles of scientific or expert-based truths and evidence, but explicitly blamed mainstream media and established politicians for deceiving and lying to the people. Baudet's critique went further, and entailed an explicit accusation of a misleading (radical) political bias and censorship allegedly used strategically to silence the people and maintain power discrepancies. This connects to demands for science-related decision-making by the ordinary people: Unlike the alleged biased and corrupt scientific elite, the ordinary people allegedly have no interest in distorting the truth, which also means that they should have the power to make scientific claims.

5.2. Right-Wing Populist Counternarratives

Especially in the period surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, Baudet referred to alternative experts, doctors, and scientists who shared his view on reality and confirmed his anti-establishment views. He, for example, legitimized his opposition to Covid-19 measures by quoting a professor arguing how vaccines are toxic, and included a (de-contextualized) interpretation that confirmed his anti-establishment perspective on Covid-19: "What if he is right, indicating that thousands of people died lonely and too soon whilst our economy is destroyed without a proper cause?" Political elites were also attacked for "hiding" behind alleged "unscientific nonsense." These findings illustrate how scientific discourse was invalidated.

Applied to other issues, such as climate change, scientific evidence was not only de-legitimized, but also contrasted with "common sense" as the real source of truthfulness: "The European Green Deal will cost us way too much—which is the only reality there is. This is conflicting with common sense. It is time to put the Netherlands and our people first." In his discourse, Baudet also labelled the Covid-19 pandemic as "hysterical"—and contrasted the alleged fake reality deliberately staged by the established order with the need to go back to normal life: "Everything needs to re-open again as we are used to. This shows the hypocrisy of power. They do not even believe in the pandemic themselves. All covid-hysterical nonsense is nothing but a big play." Baudet presented *his* truth claims, which denied Covid-19 as a pandemic and framed it as a normal flu, as the only reality. He referred to his party as the only party that dared to speak the truth: "Can you imagine if FvD will become the biggest party? The only party in Europe who speaks the truth about the virus formerly known as the flu."

Although both Wilders and Baudet clearly and explicitly attacked political elites and mainstream media for being dishonest and for lying to the people (disinformation accusations) whilst de-legitimizing established truths (RQ1), these RWP leaders still referred to and quoted expert knowledge and scientific evidence to confirm their political agendas. This supports findings by Suldovsky et al. (2019) of a selective and ideologically biased labelling of scientific authority, as well as Oliveira et al.'s (2021) conclusions indicating that radical-right wing actors strategically use ideologically aligned sources to substantiate congruent truth claims on social media.

Wilders did not present explicit counter-factual narratives that opposed established truths (RQ2). His populist ideas included attacks on the mainstream media and dishonest elites, but alternative truth claims were absent. This was different for Baudet, who quoted expert knowledge from "alternative" scientists and sources of evidence when these analyses fitted his interpretations. In other cases, the de-legitimization of established truths on Covid-19 was contrasted to references to common sense, the people's knowledge, and a universal anti-establishment reality (RQ2). The de-legitimization of expert knowledge, media sources, and elites as well as the legitimization of alternative narratives followed a clear confirmation bias. These narratives were often present together. This analysis shows that—in terms of making truth claims and de-legitimizing opposed truth claims—a prototypical manner of RWP communication does not exist: Different political leaders use different ways of constructing a confirmation-biased truth and de-legitimize the established order in different ways. The rhetoric they use to refer to deception and truth is adaptable to the context, and confirms their political positions whilst responding to their targeted audience of disenchanted citizens. Discourses of (de)legitimization are strategically employed to avoid cognitive bias (i.e., to fight off attacks from opponents) and maximize electoral gain (i.e., responding to the fears and beliefs of disenchanted voters). The online context empowers them to oppose elites and express hostile discourse without the intervention of gatekeepers. The question remains how citizens supporting these political actors and their ideas use social media to express truth claims in an antagonistic manner.

6. Results of the Analysis of Citizens' Facebook Posts

6.1. Uncivil Interactions and Fearmongering: Citizens' De-Legitimizing Discourse Online

RWP supporters used the online space to voice hostile attacks on the established media and verified facts. Here, more than the radical right-wing leaders, RWP supporters emphasized a conspiracy between the elites who allegedly deceived the people to wield power: "Police, politics, judges, media, amusement, culture, education, science, churches: all institutions are governed by a diabolical elite." Especially in the context of the pandemic, RWP supporters voiced distrust in the established version of reality, and actively denied the existence of Covid-19: "Those who believe in the dangerous 'virus narrative' and those who actually see the truth that laws are being removed to let a dictatorship enter can be separated." As this quote illustrates, the epistemic antagonism was even acknowledged by RWP supporters themselves: The people believing in the virus were seen as wrong and part of a conspiracist elite, whereas the in-group of RWP supporters were seen as "awake" and knowledgeable about true facts.

Different from the political leaders, RWP supporters did not frequently blame the mainstream media, although they accused opposed news messages and channels of demonstrating a dishonest left-wing bias. More consistently, RWP supporters pointed to the lies and conspiracies propagated by the elites: "These filthy traitors are amongst us. They are all like Judas: They are betraying the Dutch people." RWP supporters pointed to an elitist enemy—referred to as specific politicians (i.e., the Prime Minister), the government, or simply a general outgroup ("they"). RWP supporters used hostile language that frequently incited and legitimized violence ("we should buy weapons to protect ourselves from these scumbags"). They also expressed death threats targeted at the Prime Minister or other prominent politicians. Applied to the pandemic, the established truths were delegitimized by referring to conspiracies and deception: "They were dishonest when saying how busy they were with intensive care units. If you don't understand that you are deceived by now, you can move to the moon!" More specifically, and applied to the Covid-19 conspiracies expressed by RWP supporters, a strong sense of urgency, fear-mongering, and dystopic consequences were connected to the alleged lies of the elites: "This is nothing but a genocide or de-population program. They do this intentionally. It will get worse, and the deaths caused by the so-called vaccine will not even be associated with the vaccine anymore." In online interactions, people pointed to the severe consequences of the elite conspiracies: "I do not want to frighten you, Betty. But people need to do research and should not think that this is just a shot. It is over soon, and this is wrong. People are dying." These populist constructions of truth claims included an important moral component: The ordinary people and their everyday experiences were seen as virtuous, whereas experts, scientists, and doctors were seen as dishonest, deceptive, and evil: Scientific expertise was rejected and framed as deliberately misleading, allegedly to silence the ordinary people and hiding real threats.

6.2. Counter-Factual Narratives and Alternative Truth Claims

Looking at RQ1, RWP supporters, at times, used the same rhetorical tools as the established order to substantiate their own truth claims: Scientific evidence and experts were used to prove that the corrupt elite was lying to the people: "Using research and experts from India, and other papers, we show that hydroxychloroquine works. But others use fake evidence just to show it does not work." People aimed to demonstrate that they knew the "real" facts that they could see behind the "smoke screen" enforced by the elites:

> There are scientists and virologists who expect that vaccinated people will suffer from a new virus that comes soon. I am not even talking about longer-term consequences. The people who are already vaccinated are used as lab rats. I know exactly what is going on here.

Despite referring to alternative facts and evidence, expert knowledge and empirical evidence were not clearly contextualized or substantiated with sources (i.e., doctors or a majority of experts were referred to, without explaining the affiliation and expertise of the source, or the context of research findings).

Responding to RQ1 and RQ2, RWP supporters pointed to an alternative reality framed in opposition to the alleged lies and conspiracies of the elites. This reality was supported by mentioning alternative sources of expert knowledge and empirical evidence—although these were used instrumentally to substantiate truth claims without offering a context or argument for the relevance of expert knowledge. Next to truth claims based on expert knowledge and evidence, common sense and references to an elitist conspiracy were used as arguments to substantiate anti-establishment truth claims. RWP supporters claimed legitimacy for an alternative reality by revealing the "hidden" truths and conspiracies that were severely threatening the ordinary people's lives: "Let's not call it a vaccine, but genetic manipulation and genocide." The RWP discourse analysed does not simply reject expert knowledge and empirical evidence (RQ2), but constructs a counter-factual narrative that uses a mixture of de-legitimizing attacks on expert knowledge and elite actors, confirmation-biased evidence and expert knowledge, and a strong emphasis on the dystopian consequences of elite conspiracies and an urgency to reveal the hidden truth.

The additional analysis of responses to the Tweets of both political leaders confirmed the themes discussed

here. Although the comments of the ordinary people (and trolls) mainly expressed agreement with the viewpoints of the politicians, they also, at times, gave room for interaction between members of the ordinary people. Some people challenged each other, or asked others to clarify why they made certain statements. Yet, the findings demonstrate that, just like the Facebook community pages, responses to the discourse of RWP political actors on Twitters consolidate a confirmation-biased reality in which the antagonism between virtuous ordinary people and the deception of elite actors is central.

7. Conclusions

Using a qualitative content analysis of the social media expressions of RWP leaders and supporters, we asked how RWPs use the technological affordances of social media—most notably the options to circumvent elite gatekeepers and directly speak to the ordinary people and their concerns—to de-legitimize established expertise, truth claims, and evidence whilst legitimizing a people-centric version of the truth. We found that the two radical RWPs in the Dutch Twitter landscape—Baudet and Wilders—frequently accused the established media of spreading fake news and lying to the ordinary people. This confirms earlier research on the centrality of media critique and fake news accusations in RWP rhetoric (e.g., Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Hameleers & Minihold, 2021; Waisbord, 2018). This theme overlaps with the interpretation of RWP supporters, who also perceived the mainstream media as an enemy of the people (also see Fawzi, 2019). Yet, this theme was far less salient among RWP supporters than politicians: Supporters more generally referred to an unspecified or general enemy (i.e., they, the elites, politicians) and used more hostile rhetoric to exclude the established order from the people.

In line with literature signaling anti-social and detrimental consequences of online deliberation (Lowry et al., 2016), our findings indicate that online spaces are used to express hostile sentiments toward the elites, often in the forms of swearing, violence, death threats, and hate speech. Next to the more hostile tone of citizens' compared to politicians' discourse, the social media users went further in pointing to conspiracies with dystopian consequences, especially in light of Covid-19. The RWP supporters referred to the ordinary people as the only ones able to see the painful reality that is deliberately hidden from the public. The corrupt elites were seen as caught up in a conspiracy, aiming for genocide, total dominance and control over the population, or even genetic modification: Covid-19 was seen as a façade to hide reality and legitimize alleged "lethal weapons." The social media users emphasized a strong sense of urgency and fear for the future: They expressed a need for mobilization and urgent action against the elites that allegedly aimed to wield power.

What does this tell us about right-wing populism's relationship to the truth? First of all, not all RWP ideas are founded on the same logic of truth-telling and verification. Although the de-legitimization of established truths is a central aspect of both politicians' and followers' discourse, RWP rhetoric has an adaptable and heterogenous perspective on the legitimization of convenient truths. We first of all find some support for Harambam and Aupers' (2015) interpretation: Populism does not always oppose scientific institutions and empirical evidence. However, RWP ideas can, under some conditions, and especially when considering the rhetoric of RWP supporters and Baudet in times of the pandemic, reject scientific techniques and contrast de-legitimized science to people-centric knowledge, gut feelings, and common sense. This reflects Saurette and Gunster's (2011) notion of "epistemological populism": The populist replacement of scientific principles with people-centric evidence and experiences. In populist constructions of the truth, an antagonism between the people's honesty and the elite's deception is often central—and connected to a conspiracy that stresses the intentional nature of the dishonest and hidden reality propagated by the elites (Mede & Schäfer, 2020). In line with the principles of science-related populism (Mede & Schäfer, 2020), the truth claims of elite actors were seen as biased and detached from the experiences and everyday lives of the ordinary people—which included references to popular sovereignty. The ordinary people should allegedly have the power to make legitimate truth claims. This construction of populist truths has an important moral component: The ordinary people and their everyday experiences were regarded as virtuous, whereas elite actors, scientists, and doctors were seen as unvirtuous. They allegedly deceived the ordinary people and deliberately misinformed them in order to cause harm and secure gains.

Based on our findings, we coin the idea of an "adaptable and relative construction of confirmation-biased truthfulness" central in RWP discourse. This concept acknowledges the flexible and chameleonic nature of populism (also see e.g., Mazzoleni, 2003) and the universal one-sided nature of the truth propagated in populist discourse (Waisbord, 2018). RWP rhetoric may use all sorts of truth claims as long as they consolidate the political agenda and reality of the communicator. Empirical evidence and expert knowledge are quoted, de-contextualized, and re-interpreted and used as a form of argumentation as long as such knowledge is congruent with the RWP agenda (i.e., to de-legitimize the political establishment). People-centric realities, gut feelings, common sense, and conspiracy theories are strategically used in the face of counter-attitudinal evidence. This relative and flexible understanding of populist truth claims helps us to explain the inconsistency of the role of facts, experts, and evidence in populist discourse.

Regarding the limitations and scope of our conclusions, some reflections need to be included here. First of all, we focused on a single country, two specific RWP leaders, and a biased selection of community pages.

By focusing on a prototypical case of West-European right-wing populism, we believe that some of the main patterns of discourse identified here are transferrable to other European countries with successful RWP parties and similar contextual factors (i.e., moderate to high levels of distrust in mainstream media and the established political order). Hence, in other countries (i.e., Germany and France), de-legitimizing discourse and anti-media sentiments are also constantly expressed by RWP actors. In addition, overall trust levels in the mainstream media and political institutions are comparable in many European countries—which should also offer a favorable context for the relative construction of truth claims by politicians and their supporters. Yet, we suggest future research to pay more attention to regional differences and include most-different systems: Do left-wing populist actors make similar claims about (un)truthfulness, and do our findings hold in systems with either lower (i.e., the US, France, Hungary) or higher (i.e., Sweden, Norway) levels of media trust? In addition, although both Twitter and Facebook were included, there are other social media platforms and alternative media platforms that may offer a relevant context for the study of populist truth claims. To further explore the relevance of affordances that differ across platforms, future research may extend the analysis to different platforms, such as the more visually oriented platform Instagram.

Finally, there are some moral and ethical considerations connected to this study. The main researcher selected the online RWP communities based on prior experiences with these platforms—the selection is therefore biased and skewed by accessibility. Many RWP followers mobilize and communicate in private groups and closed communities that could not be accessed by this researcher. Even though RWP supporters are a difficult population to include directly in scientific research, future studies should try harder in involving their own experiences and make them an integral part of the analyses (i.e., individual interviews and focus groups).

Despite these limitations, this article has offered novel insights into how RWPs and their followers are empowered and platformed to share their antagonistic perspective on truthfulness via social media—hereby actively contributing to developments toward an increasingly more relative, debatable, and antagonistic understanding of politicized truths in a communication setting of high institutional distrust.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Article

Advocating for Platform Data Access: Challenges and Opportunities for Academics Seeking Policy Change

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Abstract
Independent researchers' access to digital platform data is critical for our understanding of the online world; yet recent reflections have shown that data are not always readily available (Asbjørn Møller & Bechmann, 2019; Bruns, 2018; Tromble, 2021). In the face of platform power to determine data accessibility, academics can often feel powerless, but opportunities and openings can emerge for scholars to shape practice. In this article, we examine the potential for academics to engage with non-academic audiences in debates around increased data access. Adopting an autoethnographic approach, we draw on our personal experiences working with policymakers and digital platforms to offer advice for academics seeking to shape debates and advocate for change. Presenting vignettes that detail our experiences and drawing on existing scholarship on how to engage with non-academic audiences, we outline the opportunities and challenges in this kind of engagement with a view to guiding other scholars interested in engaging in this space.

Keywords
advocacy; data access; non-academic engagement; platforms; policymakers

Issue
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1. Introduction

Whether studying the impact of digital technology on the world of work, political speech, public health, news consumption, elections, cartography, or much besides, scholars from a range of disciplines require access to data about people's online activities and interactions. However, these data can be exceedingly difficult, if not impossible, to obtain. The private companies that dominate the digital landscape—collecting terabytes of data about their users' behaviours and preferences—have been reluctant to share these data with independent, external researchers. Though some of these companies have occasionally shown willingness to share some data with scholars, the types and applications of such data have been limited, and scholars remain reliant on the goodwill of the platforms to provide data when and how they see fit (Asbjørn Møller & Bechmann, 2019; Bruns, 2018; Tromble, 2021). Against this backdrop, a variety of academics, civil society researchers, journalists, and policymakers have called for improved access to platform data, but less attention has been paid to the role academics can play in bringing about such change.

In this article, we explore the potential for academics to shape debates and actions related to data access. Drawing on our personal experiences engaging in this area, we argue that, far from being passive actors subject to the whims of companies and policymakers, academics

around the world can play an important role in securing better data access and helping to ensure greater platform accountability. Inspired by the auto-ethnographic tradition of academic scholarship, we combine a review of the existing literature on knowledge exchange and achieving "academic impact" with our own experiences of engaging with non-academic communities to consider the opportunities and challenges scholars can face. Our aim is to cast light on the challenges encountered in this space and to provide scholars with the knowledge required to continue this important work. Whilst our experiences point to positive developments in bringing about change, we argue that academics need to understand more clearly the particularities of working with companies and policymakers to engender change in this space. As the internet continues to rapidly evolve and pose new challenges for academic research, this skill set will become increasingly valuable.

We begin with an overview of the debate around data access, before discussing our autoethnographic methodology and then turning to our personal experiences. We combine short vignettes detailing our experiences with key insights from the existing literature on knowledge exchange. Using this approach, we highlight the opportunities and challenges of non-academic engagement and reflect on the lessons our experiences offer others. We end by offering advice for scholars who wish to engage in public-facing policy work related to data access and beyond.

2. Data Access

When it comes to determining precisely what impact technology has had on society, researchers are constrained by issues of data access. Dominated by private companies, a range of information now lies in the hands of corporations that are under no obligation to facilitate independent research (Algorithm Watch, 2020, p. 5). Whilst a longstanding challenge for scholars interested in digital technology, in recent years the situation has arguably gotten worse, as companies have further restricted data availability. Most notably, this occurred in the wake of the Cambridge Analytica controversy when, in 2018, social media platforms restricted access to data via their application programming interfaces (APIs). This "APIcalyse" (Bruns, 2019) significantly curtailed the availability of data for analysis (Freelon, 2018, p. 665). Indeed, reviewing data availability for key platforms, Asbjørn Møller and Bechmann (2019, p. 2) conclude that "the methods for data exchange provided by the social media platforms are subject to increasingly strict restrictions of data access, making it difficult—if not impossible—to extract substantial social media data for thorough investigations.''

Since these developments, certain avenues for academic research have begun to open (Tromble, 2021, p. 3). Individual companies have taken steps to provide datasets for academic researchers, with some companies providing curated sets of publicly available data in online archives (such as the advertising archives offered by Facebook, Google, and Snapchat [Edelson et al., 2018]), and others working with specific researchers (e.g., Vosoughi et al., 2018). Academics have also been working with platforms to broker access to specific datasets, most notably through the Social Science One initiative (King & Persily, 2018, 2020). These developments are to be welcomed, and yet they are limited. There remains a huge amount of data about the digital world that is not available for scrutiny, meaning, as Persily has argued, that "we do not know even what we do not know concerning a host of pathologies attributed to social media and digital communication technologies" (2021, p. 1).

In proposing a response to this situation, academics have begun to outline a range of options. Bruns (2019), for example, has argued that academics can either give up, lobby for change, accommodate and acquiesce, or break the rules to gain access to data. Within this article, our interest is in the potential for academics to play an active role in shaping debates, including by "lobbying" or "advocating" for a specific outcome (Pielke, 2007, pp. 2–3; see also Perriam et al., 2020, p. 279). Heeding Puschmann's call for the research community to "engage constructively with all stakeholders, including internet companies, but also with regulators and political actors, in order to improve the current situation" (2019, p. 1583), we are interested in how academics can engage to alter the status quo.

Considering the case of increased data access, it is worth clarifying that, as individuals, we do not uncritically assume that unfettered data access is good, or even necessary. Rather, we are interested in how academics can participate in nuanced discussions about when and how researchers might responsibly attain access to data in service of the broader public good (Tromble, 2021). Whilst this kind of advocacy is gaining increased interest from the academic community, to date, there has been little discussion of what engagement in the policy realm involves for academics, and specifically about the nature and risks of such activity. For this reason, within this article, we offer an auto-ethnographic account of our own experiences and draw on existing literature on knowledge exchange and achieving "academic impact" to offer advice for scholars considering this form of activity.

3. The Autoethnographic Approach

The autoethnographic approach seeks "to describe and systematically analyze (*graphy*) personal experience (*auto*) in order to understand cultural experience (*ethno*)" (Ellis et al., 2011, p. 273). The methodology relies on the "writing of self-narratives" to provide "a window through which self and others can be understood" (Chang, 2016, p. 13). One's positionality is particularly important within autoethnography. As Ellis et al. (2011) note, "when researchers do autoethnography,

they retrospectively and selectively write about epiphanies that stem from, or are made possible by, being part of a culture and/or by possessing a particular cultural identity'' (p. 276).

To be sure, the experiences we describe herein have been informed and shaped by both structural factors and personal idiosyncrasies, and we certainly do not make any claims to universality. We are both white, middle-class scholars, employed by well-respected academic institutions. These factors allowed us to enter policy and industry spaces with a degree of presumed credibility. We are also both political scientists, which provided us with a baseline understanding of how political institutions operate and how we might navigate within them. (Though we certainly were naïve in many ways that we learned along the way.) But perhaps most importantly, we both have the professional security provided by tenure. While we were unlikely to gain institutional reward for engaging in advocacy work, our careers were never on the line.

At the same time, as women, policy and industry spaces—each heavily imbued with patriarchal norms and misogyny—were often profoundly uncomfortable and difficult to traverse. As we discuss in greater detail below, all too often, we found ourselves upstaged and crowded out by men with less knowledge and expertise. What is more, at the time we began this work, neither of us was especially well-known in our fields, and though our institutions were well-regarded, they were not among the most elite. Indeed, in the early days, neither of us could call on influential contacts to help open doors. For each of us, these circumstances led to many frustrations, and at times left us questioning whether we should forge ahead.

Recognizing intersectional privileges and structural constraints is a key part of the autoethnographic approach (McKay, 2021, p. 89). However, we should note that we did not enter advocacy work with the intention of making our experiences the subject of study and analysis. We were undertaking work *in support of* our research but not as *an object of* research, per se. In other words, we did not see ourselves at the time as (auto)ethnographers. And thus, we did not undertake many of the careful, systematic techniques typical of (auto)ethnography (see Chang, 2016). We did not, for example, consider those with whom we interacted to be research subjects. They only became so retrospectively. And, as such—beyond the clarification of ground rules for reporting on meetings and other interactions (e.g., via non-disclosure agreements or the application of Chatham House Rules)—we did not obtain consent from our interlocutors. This naturally raises ethical concerns (Delamont, 2009, p. 59; Ellis et al., 2011, p. 281). We have therefore followed McKay (2021, p. 90) in choosing to avoid presenting much detail and specificity in the vignettes we offer below. This choice necessarily inhibits the analytical richness typical of autoethnographic accounts, and yet we believe our chosen vignettes still enable us to tell " 'pointed truths' that have the potential for creating change and envisioning ways forward" (McKay, 2021, p. 89).

It should also be noted that, contrary to the expectations of "autoethnography as methodology" (Chang, 2016), we did not take methodical field notes. However, in many instances, we did take meeting notes or contemporaneously record reflections and items to remember after interactions with policymakers, platform representatives, and other researchers. We also have extensive documentation in the form of emails, collaborative documents, and reports we have authored, and this rich record has allowed us to recall significant thoughts, frustrations, reflections, and insights—i.e., key "epiphanies" (Ellis et al., 2011)—from several years' worth of work. We reviewed these documents in identifying and compiling our vignettes to ensure their robustness; yet we wish to make clear that our records are imperfect, our memories flawed, and the reflections we offer here are undoubtedly coloured by survivorship bias.

We share our reflections here because, while advocacy work among academics is still rare, we believe it is growing in importance. Though some pockets of academia have remained relatively insular—speaking primarily, if not exclusively, to other academics—that position is growing increasingly untenable for many. Public officials, external funders, and university administrators alike are calling on academics to ensure our work reaches the public. This in turn means that ever-growing numbers of scholars find themselves treading into unfamiliar spaces, engaging with policymakers and practitioners in contexts that seem foreign and at times possibly even uncomfortable. Thus, though personal, the vignettes we offer in the following section relate our experiences to themes within existing academic literature on knowledge exchange and achieving "academic impact" (Boswell & Smith, 2017; Dunleavy & Tinker, 2020; Pielke, 2007).

4. Our Autoethnographic Experiences

To preface our analysis, some broad context about our respective roles is necessary. Rebekah has been working with technology companies, politicians, and academics in the USA and Europe since 2018, notably advising policymakers developing legislation within the EU and USA. She leads an international, interdisciplinary team of independent researchers selected by Twitter after an open request for proposals to study the "health of conversations" on the platform. She was also a member of the European Advisory Committee of Social Science One, and she serves as chair of the European Digital Media Observatory working group that has brought together academic, industry, and civil society representatives to develop a Code of Conduct for data access under the EU's General Data Protection Regulation. These experiences have led her to build extensive relationships with academics, civil society representatives, policymakers, and tech company staff.

Katharine’s engagement is more recent and focuses primarily on the UK and European policy debates. Specifically, she served as special advisor to the House of Lords Committee on Democracy and Digital Technology in 2019–2020 and in this role worked with policymakers to write background notes, draft questions, identify witnesses and contribute to the final committee report. She has also engaged with the European Commission around the new Digital Services Act, as well as numerous parliamentary inquiries in the UK. At present, she serves on the European Digital Media Observatory’s working group on access to platform data.

We both have first-hand experience reaching beyond academia and engaging with non-academic audiences and have witnessed these efforts begin to bear fruit. We have also observed the processes through which policy recommendations are developed and company policies and practices are updated and evolve. In the next section, we draw on this knowledge and, by reflecting on the personal and systemic factors that have conditioned our experiences and relating these to existing literature, distil lessons and offer advice for other scholars seeking to engage in similar work.

5. Advocating for Platform Data Access: Two Key Insights

Our reflections focus on two aspects of policy and advocacy work that we believe are particularly important. These are: gaining access and confronting professional barriers. Each theme is discussed below in turn.

5.1. Gaining Access

Our first theme focuses on the challenges of gaining access to non-academic arenas. Within existing scholarship on non-academic engagement, it can appear that external audiences are eagerly awaiting academic insights. Offering an often idealized and linear account of academic engagement, scholars are encouraged to conduct research and then communicate it to wider society to inform real-world practices (Weiss, 1979, p. 427). Advice often focuses on how to communicate clearly and effectively (Farmer, 2010; Oliver & Cairney, 2019, p. 3), but there is rarely much discussion of who the audience for this information is, and where communication should be targeted.

These questions are particularly important for a topic like data access, because non-academic engagement is likely to require interaction with a range of actors—from policymakers to civil society organizations, tech companies to journalists, and the public at-large. Gaining the attention of each of these actors is not straightforward, as each has their own set of incentives driving their interest and willingness to engage. Accordingly, we use our vignettes to interrogate our experience of engaging with the two sets of actors who have proven most pivotal to progress on the issue of data access: policymakers and tech company representatives. Comparing our experiences, we reflect on the personal and structural factors that have affected our engagement and consider what this means for others attempting to secure access in these arenas.

5.2. Vignette 1: Katharine’s Experience

With policymakers, I have had the most success gaining access and have been able to exercise the most control over the process. This capacity evolved over time and with professional support, as initially I had little knowledge of how policymaking forums worked, and in my first few encounters I felt deeply intimidated and ill-equipped to contribute. At the start of my career, I was, however, fortunate enough to have a mentor who introduced me to the array of Parliamentary inquiries, consultations, roundtable discussions, and closed-door meetings that occur in the UK. Proactively building on this advice, I familiarized myself with these forums and gradually grew to understand the rules of engagement.

When my research started to move up the political agenda, this familiarity proved invaluable. I not only understood where to look for relevant opportunities to engage, but also what kind of information they wanted. I was also aware of the incentives that drove policymakers’ interactions with academics, knowing that the UK Parliament had committed to diversifying its source of expertise (beyond the usual male suspects from London universities). I was able to use this knowledge to my advantage and began to contact those responsible for new inquiries in my areas of interest—an approach that led me to be appointed as a special advisor.

My access to policymakers, therefore, reflected the investment I was able to make in gaining an understanding of and familiarity with these institutions—an investment supported by colleagues and my university. It also reflected my accommodation to systemic factors, as I was willing to work within the existing system towards incremental change, and to adapt to hierarchical and often patriarchal norms of parliamentary engagement. Many other scholars may be unable or unwilling to make such accommodations.

My experience with companies, on the other hand, could not have been more different. Whilst I was able to cultivate an understanding of the policymaking world, I had little understanding of tech companies, no existing relationships with them, and few means of accessing support to cultivate relationships. My attempts to engage company staff at public events were often greeted dismissively. Epitomized by a conversation at a workshop at the European Commission, an employee from Facebook responded to my request for a business card by saying that the company did not use them. Two minutes later, I looked across the room to see the same employee pass a business card to a high-profile attendee from another social media company. This experience was indicative of the lack of value I apparently had to companies—

something I felt powerless to change. The degree to which tech companies themselves were determining my apparent value became particularly evident when I was appointed special advisor to the House of Lords inquiry. Finally, I began receiving responses to my emails, and I was invited to Facebook headquarters in London to discuss my research and explore areas of mutual interest. This influence was, however, short-lived. As soon as my tenure with the Lords ended, so did Facebook's responsiveness. Whilst I, therefore, found I had some degree of control over my access, there were wider structural and cultural factors at play that I had little ability to control.

5.3. Vignette 2: Rebekah's Experience

Unlike Katharine, my early career training did not provide opportunities to witness or work within policy circles, and my initial failures reflected my resulting naivete. Based in the Netherlands, when I began working on the issue of data access, I first focused on attending high-profile policy events in Brussels. Though I met many interesting people along the way, these events rarely proved fruitful. There were simply too many people—all clamouring for attention and recognition. In these large, open settings, institutional power dynamics were particularly evident. Titles and affiliations were currency, and on several occasions, I found my arguments pushed aside, only to be taken up again when influential men echoed them. I often doubted whether I would ever belong or be heard in these spaces.

Yet, over time, I did begin to feel like I belonged. I was eventually heard. And I attribute this shift to two intentional, strategic changes I made. First, I began looking for smaller, lower-stakes opportunities to engage with policymakers. Indeed, my "big break," as it were, came when I attended a small disinformation workshop in Milan. I was not an invited speaker or panellist; I was merely an attendee, welcomed by a former student who knew I was interested in the topic. But with fewer than 100 people gathered—and situated well away from the traditional centres of European political power—the workshop was more relaxed. Credentials and status mattered much less, and there was less jockeying for attention. About midway through the workshop, during a panel Q&A session, someone in the audience asked a question about the latest news from Social Science One. Was the initiative making any progress in attaining data access from Facebook? The question was addressed to the panellists, but, as it turned out, I was the only one in the room directly involved in the initiative. I wound up fielding the question, as well as follow-ups, and at the next break, two policy staffers and several researchers working closely with officials at the European Commission approached me and asked if I would be willing to take some meetings. Within the next month, I had spoken with officials and key members of their staff in France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Brussels.

These opportunities arose because of the structures of political and intellectual power within which I was embedded. When I began venturing into the policy arena, I lacked political capital. I was not a star in my field. My name and title meant little to my intended audience. I wielded a baseline level of acknowledged credibility, but this afforded me little advantage when sharing space, and competing for recognition, with academic "superstars" from the most elite institutions. At the smaller, less prestigious Milan event, however, my specialized knowledge and expertise permitted a critical breakthrough moment. I was in the right place at the right time. But the place and time were right precisely because the political stakes were significantly lower, and my expertise could stand on its own.

Once I had my foot in the door, I implemented my second strategy shift—carefully reshaping my style of communication with policymakers and their staff to help ensure that my expertise would be recognized, valued, and called on again. Namely, I worked to tie the issue I cared about so much—data access—to the issues at the top of policymakers' agendas and to do so in highly illustrative ways (i.e., usually supported by colourful examples or a simple but rich narrative story). There were natural links to topics like disinformation, political polarization, civil rights, etc., but in the early days, I arrived at those large, high-pressure events unprepared and ill-equipped to communicate those links. Yet, once I began securing closed-door meetings with policymakers, I quickly learned that demonstrated expertise, communicated clearly and vividly, is of the utmost importance.

This, too, I view through the lens of structural power. Initially lacking the weight of institutional prestige and the authority of masculine voice, I was able to gain and maintain my standing in these political spaces by serving as translator and storyteller—simplifying complex issues and articulating them through vivid narratives that captured and held attention.

This bridging, storytelling role has proven essential to gaining access to the platforms as well. Put bluntly, the leaders of Silicon Valley corporations generally want to deal with—and in many cases, co-opt—people they believe have significant influence. That usually translates to a preference for working with and providing access to academics at elite universities, those who publish in top journals, and those who garner significant media attention. USA academics at Ivy League institutions are usually preferred, and members of the platforms' communications and policy teams—those most likely to be interested in prestige and influence—typically act as company gatekeepers.

However, each of these companies also has teams of engineers and researchers whose interests are well-aligned with independent scholars. Because engineers and researchers are focused day-to-day on building better products, tools, and systems, they have good reason to seek out and even collaborate with academics. I found some of my greatest allies within these companies while

attending conferences or lectures, and after talking to many about mutual research interests, began to be invited to informally consult and help think through common problems and ideas. Through these interactions, I began to understand much more clearly how the companies operate, including what incentives different actors inside the companies possess. That knowledge has helped me become a much more effective advocate for data access. When speaking with policymakers now, I can explain different aspects of the problem and reflect thoughtfully about potential solutions—not just from the academic perspective, but also realistically assessing arguments offered by the tech companies. In other words, I can help policymakers more effectively filter and interpret corporate talking points, separating cynical spin from the arguments offered in good faith and with merit. This influence with policymakers, in turn, opens more doors within the companies, creating an access feedback loop that has proven crucial in overcoming my own lack of superstar, Ivy League credentials. If I continue to engage with policymakers, the platforms will continue to engage with me.

In short, power begets access. However, in this case, the route to power was paved by the professional spaces I share with tech company researchers. The type of research I conduct—namely, computational social science—places me in dialogue (literal and figurative) with company researchers. We publish in similar venues, regularly cite one another's work. We speak a common research "language." These shared cultural understandings—unavailable to many other academics—have been the key to building relationships that, in turn, increased my understanding of, and furthered my access to, the companies themselves.

5.4. Reflections on the Vignettes

These two vignettes suggest that gaining access to policymakers and companies is not always straightforward and is conditioned by a range of personal and structural factors that can enable or constrain access. At our most successful, we have been supported either by mentors or institutional configurations (e.g., tenure) that have enabled, if not necessarily always encouraged, our investment in these spaces, and we have both been willing to adapt in the face of varying cultures of engagement. These opportunities will not be open to all scholars, and hence we do not suggest that all academics should seek to engage in this kind of work. Access is often difficult, requiring sustained personal investment that poses personal and/or professional trade-offs and risks that are simply too high.

For those who are willing and able to engage in this kind of work, our vignettes suggest that certain strategies can pay dividends. Both of our experiences demonstrate the value of a proactive, creative approach that involves familiarising yourself with your chosen institution and audience and their needs, attending events, and determining the unique contributions you can offer. This conclusion aligns with advice within the existing literature on knowledge exchange, which suggests that scholars should "get to know how policy works," "[b]e accessible" to policymakers through routine engagement (Oliver & Cairney, 2019, p. 3), and develop a shared understanding (Lomas, 2000). And yet, our vignettes also show that the payoff is far from guaranteed. One may be present, prepared, and available and still never attain real access. In part, this is because of different institutional cultures. Policymaking environments often actively look for new perspectives and, at times, unfamiliar voices, but this is not the case with tech companies. Indeed, we have both seen first-hand that reputation and influence are essential to these companies. And though alternative routes may be available—especially if one operates within shared cultural spaces with company employees—the amount of time and energy required to cultivate access may prove daunting. A degree of personal reflection is therefore required to determine where it is best to target your efforts. One might, for example, map existing and potential points of contact and connection, thinking not just about the people you already know, but about what lower-stakes opportunities might be available to forge new contacts. Consider whom among your intended audience is most likely to speak a shared language and understand your perspective, and use interest alignment and common perspectives as a starting point.

5.5. Confronting Professional Barriers

The second theme we explore is the question of professional barriers to engagement. Within the literature on non-academic engagement, a rich strand of reflection and critique demonstrates just how high these barriers remain. Concerns have been raised about the time and resources required, the risk of burnout (Graffy, 1999), and the challenge of juggling engagement alongside the many other pressures of academia (Khan et al., 2019). Attention has also been paid to the professional costs and benefits of this activity, recognizing that this work is not uniformly valued. As Farmer has argued, "[a]cademics generally do not receive much credit from their institutions for providing information to policymakers, unless their efforts result in funding" (2010, p. 717), with Watermeyer (2015) finding that public engagement work rarely contributes towards promotion. Even where demonstrating "impact" is valued by academic institutions, existing research suggests that scholars' ability to deliver tangible outcomes is by no means guaranteed. Indeed, Cairney and Oliver (2020) highlight that an investment of time may pay off only after years or decades, creating uncertain returns for scholars engaging in this kind of work. There are also acknowledged reputational risks, with scholars often judged by peers to be "lightweight" because they engage non-academic audiences (Maynard, 2015).

In addition, systemic barriers operate unevenly. As Oliver and Cairney highlight, engagement is often

more difficult for "more junior or untenured researchers" (2019, p. 6), arguing elsewhere that "white men," who "are more likely to be in senior academic positions, published and cited in high 'impact' journals" are more likely to have the resources and profile to be able to engage (Cairney & Oliver, 2020, p. 237; see also Geddes, 2018). Relatedly, even if managing to take opportunities, research shows that "women and people of colour may be more subject to personal abuse or exploitation" (Oliver & Cairney, 2019, p. 6), creating uneven consequences of public engagement. Beyond these factors, certain kinds of knowledge are more likely to gain an audience than others. Indeed, academics advancing criticism, marginal perspectives, or politically incongruous messages can gain less traction for their ideas amongst stakeholders (Wright et al., 2007). Building on this, we argue that it is vital for academics to cultivate professional and personal support.

5.6. Vignette 3: Rebekah's Experience

I have experienced the difficulties of pursuing policy-oriented work in two very different academic environments: Leiden University and George Washington University (GW), respectively. When I first took a position at Leiden University, policy work did not cross my mind. Though many senior male colleagues served as consultants to government agencies and one colleague was a political party leader, for junior scholars, there simply was no career benefit. We were evaluated based on teaching and research output, with emphasis on the latter. A few years later, universities in the Netherlands began to pay more attention to so-called "valorisation," and our media citations and other forms of public outreach began factoring into annual reports. However, valorisation was treated more as a sweetener on top of our staple diet of teaching and research than a core component of our work. It looked good for the university but had little to no impact on promotion and other forms of career advancement. In fact, in some cases, high levels of public engagement were considered a detriment. Egalitarianism is highly valued in Dutch culture, and activities that could be interpreted as individualistic, especially if considered "showy" or "attention-seeking," were actively frowned upon by many colleagues. Thus, the path of least resistance was preferable, especially before tenure. However, even after tenure, when I started taking more risks and began wading into the policy realm, it was clear that there simply was not much space for public-facing work. Indeed, colleagues—especially senior male colleagues—at times openly questioned my commitment to "real" academic inquiry, occasionally even (subtly but painfully) mocking my work. This cultural environment directly contributed to my decision to leave my position in the Netherlands.

My move to GW drastically changed these circumstances. Located in the heart of Washington, the university actively encourages "engaged scholarship." Traditional academic faculty work alongside practitioners; I have as many colleagues who are current or former journalists, diplomats, or policymakers as I do colleagues who fit the conventional scholar mode. One's impact on public discourse and policy agendas is valued by students, faculty, and administrators alike. At GW I am encouraged to continue my work with European policymakers and have naturally brought my data access agenda to policymakers in Washington. The more I can use my expert insights to reach beyond the ivory tower and engage wider audiences, the better.

Of course, what I have found at GW is outside the norm, even within the relatively individualistic environment of American universities. There are few institutions that embrace public-facing scholarship and policy work as actively and intentionally as GW. And to be perfectly clear, I still face significant career trade-offs. My policy work at times verges on all-consuming. I am not publishing at the rate I would like, and it may take longer for me to be promoted to full professor as a result. Yet, ultimately, I do find the trade-offs worth it. I see my knowledge and insights having tangible impacts, and that is more important to me than traditional forms of career advancement. Still, I recognize that this is a choice that I am very privileged to be able to make at all.

5.7. Vignette 4: Katharine's Experience

In the UK "impact" has become an embedded part of academia. Whilst not something done by all academics, a focus on "impact case studies" as part of the Research Excellence Framework assessing academic work has raised the profile of non-academic engagement. Whilst during my PhD impact was rarely discussed, as my academic career has progressed, I've been routinely encouraged through performance reviews, mentoring, and promotions processes to think about my "external standing" and impact on the world. Fortuitously, my personal research motivations align with these incentives, and I have been able to gain recognition for work that a decade ago may have gone unrecognized. However, I have also encountered a range of barriers and challenges which I've been able to challenge to different degrees.

At a practical level, as an academic based outside of London, the material costs of engagement are high. To be in London at 9 am I must be up well before dawn and spend over 3 hours traveling each way. I've been fortunate that my institution provides some funds for this kind of activity, and that some organizations have allowed me to claim expenses to cover the £200+ cost of travel, but there have nevertheless been numerous occasions where I have missed out on opportunities because of cost or time factors and instances where my health and energy levels have suffered because of decisions to travel.

At a more personal level, I've also encountered challenges relating to the task of making contributions to a

range of high profile, public, and often pressured environments. As someone who is not naturally comfortable with public speaking and who certainly does not enjoy making self-aggrandizing interventions, I've often found it difficult to have my voice heard. I have sat on many panels where I have been reluctant to "jump in" to the discussion, and I have been interrupted or spoken over more often than I care to remember. This makes it incredibly challenging to establish a reputation or exhibit the kind of authoritative voice that many audiences appear to demand.

These experiences can be deeply discouraging and have at times made me doubt the value of my engagement, but over time I have come to recognize that I am not alone in encountering these barriers and that there are sources of support. By serendipitously encountering other (often female) academics conducting this kind of work, and by subsequently consciously joining or building forums to discuss these issues, I've been able to gather advice and practical support. Whilst not overcoming all the barriers I've encountered, this community of peers has immeasurably supported my non-academic engagement.

5.8. Reflections on the Vignettes

These experiences highlight the range of challenges that academics can confront. Echoing existing literature, we both encountered professional and personal barriers to undertaking this work that directly undermined our ability to advocate for data access. If scholars are to be proactive, build relationships, and broker events, then time and resources are vital. But, as our vignettes show, both are exceedingly scarce. Indeed, Rebekah was only able to find the kind of support available to Katharine by switching institutions and countries. Given that this option is not available to most academics, we argue that scholars should, at the outset, consider whether institutional support is available and whether this engagement is valued. This involves asking whether you can access travel resources from your institution or via stakeholder appointments, whether there is training available, and how this activity is recognized in professional incentive structures. We have both been fortunate to find employers who value, invest in, and recognize our work, but where that is not the case, we think it is important for others to carefully consider whether they are willing to make this investment, potentially at their own personal and professional expense.

We also wish to highlight the importance of informal support. We have both benefitted from finding like-minded individuals with whom to share experiences and gain advice. Indeed, one of the best things we have done is to find and engage with one another. Proactively working to forge connections with others conducting similar work—either by personally reaching out to others already active in this space or by seeking professional associations or networks that promote policy engagement—can provide tremendous personal and professional support. Whilst this of course does not eliminate the often-daunting sexist, racist, classist, and other institutional barriers, it can provide solidarity in navigating non-academic engagement. Indeed, we believe that by being aware of the potential stresses and strains before engaging, it is possible to curate a professional and personal environment that can support, rather than hinder, engagement.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on our personal experiences and relating these to themes in the existing literature around non-academic engagement, in this article we have sought to explore the challenges and opportunities that academics engaging in what Bruns (2019) terms "lobbying for change" on data access and other professional issues may confront. Offering a series of vignettes that highlight different elements of our experience, we have sought to unpack the personal and structural factors that have conditioned our activity and, by reflecting on commonalities and variations in our experience, formulate advice for others interested in engaging in this area.

Reviewing our experiences, what emerges is sustained evidence that engaging with non-academic audiences is both feasible and rewarding, yet also extremely difficult and fraught with risks. Whilst we, therefore, welcome Bruns' call for more academics to engage in this activity, we also want to highlight the range of constraining factors that, in retrospect, we wish we had been aware of at the outset. At the personal level, scholars do not all come to the table with the same basic training and skillsets. Our professional backgrounds as political scientists, and Katharine's further policy training and expertise, offered advantaged starting points for this work. Whether impacting audience access or affecting the degree to which we are willing (or able) to adapt to norms of engagement, personal factors like our training—and even personal temperament—shape the opportunities and obstacles we encounter in this work. We also note the significance of structural factors at play. Whether considering academia as an institution or the dynamics of the audiences with which we seek to engage, the power structures, cultural norms, and expectations of different arenas offer both obstacles and opportunities. Indeed, we both faced significant obstacles resulting from our relatively weak networks, our gender, and our lack of elite status and prestige. At the same time, however, our status as credentialed, middle-class, white professionals afforded us standing that others would not enjoy so automatically.

Whilst no single recipe exists for engagement, our vignettes have sought to highlight ways in which it is possible for academics to exert agency—and even influence—while navigating challenging environments. First, in our discussion of data access, we reflected on the importance of proactive and creative thinking. Though

fettered to some degree by personal and structural constraints, our experiences demonstrate the value of gaining familiarity, maintaining a presence at different types of events, and forging relationships with a variety of actors. As recognized in the existing literature on knowledge exchange, these relationships are vital to establishing both your reputation and high degrees of trust. Whilst scholars will likely encounter different barriers in building and maintaining these relationships, we advise others to persevere and invest in these kinds of activities.

Second, in reflecting on the numerous barriers we have confronted, we have considered the degree to which it is possible to exercise control. For the most part, scholars have limited ability to change the professional context in which they find themselves. But it is notable that such institutions do exist, and hence we would suggest that scholars particularly invested in this kind of work should, to the extent possible, proactively seek out employers who value this activity. There are also actions that individuals can take to try to mitigate, or at least temper, some of the personal barriers that can be confronted. Whilst it is often not possible to tackle systemic biases against certain groups of individuals, we have found informal support to be invaluable. We, therefore, advise that any academic seeking to engage in this work should strive to connect with other scholars engaged in similar activity. Whether forged through personal networks, or via professional associations, we view cultivating this kind of network to be invaluable.

In offering these reflections, we set out to provide researchers with advice on how to engage with non-academic audiences. Our reflections focus, however, on specific geographic and political contexts. Drawing in particular on our experiences with the European Commission and UK parliament we examined well-established political systems that provide numerous entry points. We also focused on contexts where platform companies have well-established resources, including staff. These dynamics are not, however, always commonplace. Different political systems focus to different degrees on expert input, whilst platforms invest much less in staffing in different parts of the world. For this reason, we recognize that our precise experiences may not translate to different political contexts. Whilst we hope that our guidance resonates in a range of settings, we recognize that academics may need to explore and develop alternative approaches to engagement.

Though focused on the issue of data access, we believe that our reflections have wider relevance for scholars interested in other topics. Our findings are likely to be of particular interest to academics who are seeking to bring about change on a topic relevant to multiple audiences, but especially policymakers and tech companies. Given the rapidly evolving nature of the internet, a range of new challenges is likely to emerge over time. Rather than acting as passive recipients of these changes, we believe that academics can play an active role in pushing for and shaping change. By demystifying the processes and highlighting important elements of these activities, we hope to encourage others to invest in this work.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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