

# **Instagram, Political Participation, and Critical Media Literacy**

An Exploratory Analysis of German Young Adults' Critical Media  
Literacy in Engagement with Political Content on Instagram

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## Abstract

The use of social media platforms like Instagram for consumption of news and political content has gained large popularity among young adults in Germany. Simultaneously, an increase of criminal right-wing organization and radicalization has been noted in the same demographic group. These developments make it crucial to better understand how and why young adults engage with political content on social media. Notably, while much research has been invested in developing insights at this intersection, little to no works have focussed on the role of critical media literacy in the engagement patterns and motivations. Further, as most approaches have been quantitative, qualitative understanding is lacking. This thesis addresses these scientific gaps, by focussing on the most used social media platform among the target group, Instagram, and asking: *How do German young adults draw on critical media literacy when engaging with political content on Instagram?* Based on thematic analysis of ten semi-structured interviews with politically left-oriented, well-educated young adults, this work finds, that the participants overall successfully apply critical media literacy for informed and reflected consumption of and engagement with political content on Instagram. This e.g. includes detecting underlying algorithmic structures or purposely applied representational means for opinion manipulation, as well as questioning reliability of content and seeking additional sources to fact-check. However, the findings also highlight a *selective* application of critical media literacy, as the participants mostly applied their criticality in favor of the own and against other viewpoints. This challenges the predominant scholarly assumption that critical media literacy naturally fosters a balanced approach to media texts. Thus, this study highlights a need for revisiting the definition of critical media literacy, and points at the relevance of increasing scholarly engagement with the concept in relation to young adults' political socialization and participation on social media platforms, specifically with additional foci on different educational and political backgrounds, in order to further contribute to the societal relevance and create a more exhaustive, nuanced picture.

## Keywords

Social Media, Instagram, Critical Media Literacy, Political Participation, Young Adults.

## Abbreviations

CML	—	Critical Media Literacy
ICTs	—	Information and Communication Technologies
IG	—	Instagram
ML	—	Media Literacy
NGO	—	Non-Governmental-Organization
SM	—	Social Media

**Word Count:** 19.857

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## **1. Introduction**

As mobile device usage increases globally, so does the popularity of social media (SM). This has simultaneous effects on SM's political relevance and role in society. The thesis at hand aims to contribute to existing research concerning SM, Critical Media Literacy (CML), and Political Participation by qualitatively exploring how German young adults draw on CML when engaging with political content on Instagram (IG).

### **1.1. Contextualization and Relevance**

Moving beyond entertainment, SM have entered and continuously foster a politicized, digital public sphere, of which they appear to be the “most dominant manifestation” (Staab and Thiel, 2022, p. 140). Over the last years, it has been observed that people are decreasingly using traditional outlets for news and political content, and instead turn to SM for a more (selective) experience of non-journalistic media texts (Newman et al., 2024, p. 10, 53). This appears to be specifically true for young adults aged 18 to 24 (Marquart et al., 2020, p. 196), a generation known as ‘digital natives’ with strong abilities to use various forms of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). As previous research highlights, SM platforms thus have a significant impact on people’s political socialization, participation, and efficacy (Marquart et al., 2020, p. 197; Möller et al., 2014, p. 696; Möller et al., 2018, p. 445, 457). Simultaneously, an increasing spread of political radicalization, conspiracy theories, and propaganda through the internet and SM platforms has been observed (Akram and Nasar, 2023, p. 284), posing a serious threat to democratic societies. Just recently, the German chief of the Federal Criminal Police Office (German: Bundeskriminalamt) stressed the task for society as a whole to better understand and counter the increasing criminal right-wing radicalization and organization of young citizens, that specifically occurs on the Internet and SM (ZDFheute, 2025, paras. 1-5). Thus, as Möller et al. (2020) argue, understanding “how, when, and why citizens are exposed to news is of crucial importance for any democratic society” (pp. 616-617).

While scholars have engaged in understanding how exposure to political content on SM impacts political participation (e.g., Bakker and de Vreese, 2011, p. 452) or how platforms may, on the other side, help to reach apolitical citizens (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018, p. 85), these approaches have predominantly been quantitative. However, in order to come up with strategies to counter, e.g., said threats to democracy posed by online radicalization, the underlying processes and motivations of young adults’ online engagement with political content need to be understood more deeply. Further, while a significant body of research exists on young adults’ use of SM, little to no effort has been made to bridge their engagement patterns with the concept of CML. Specifically, not in a qualitative manner and in relation to political content and participation online. CML relates to and extends media literacy through adding a critical lens. It emphasizes skills to critically inform oneself, understand and competently reflect upon media products, as well as to detect and engage with media representations of ideologies and societal issues (Kellner and Share, 2007b, p. 61, 63; Kellner and Share, 2019, p. 6; Potter, 2023, p. 115). In short, CML aims to equip people with critical thinking abilities to decode power relations between media, audiences, and information (Kellner and Share, 2007a, p. 59). Further, the concept has been found to be a key factor in people’s political

participation and thus functioning democracies (Kellner and Share, 2007a, p. 59), making it highly relevant to this study. As the Internet increasingly “facilitates (...) decentralization of power, political participation and deliberative democracy, but also political repression, surveillance and misinformation” (Polizzi, 2023, p. 1212), the level and application of CML in engagement with political content on SM proves decisive for future social and political developments. How critically do young adults approach political content online? In what ways do CML skills inform their engagement patterns? Are they aware of or able to discover bias in media productions, underlying motivations, propaganda, misinformation, and content produced by Artificial Intelligence (AI)? Specifically, in young adults, it has been found that self-confidence over CML skills enhances their “exposure to, (...) expression of [and engagement with] political perspectives” (Polizzi, 2025, p. 4). However, despite the growing theoretical, societal and political relevance of CML, it remains underutilized as an analytical framework in research concerned with SM and political participation.

Against the backdrop of these research gaps, societal relevance and topicality, this study aims to produce deeper insights about the ways in which German young adults draw on CML while engaging with political content, specifically on IG.

## 1.2. Research Aim, Method, and Question

As noted, most previous studies on SM and political participation are quantitative and have only scarcely taken CML into account, which for this study adds a valuable contribution to the scientific field. The aim is not only to create deeper understanding of how young adults engage with political content *technically*, but also with which motivation, awareness and feeling of responsibility. The proposed focus on German young adults is justified and highly relevant for two main reasons. First, they showed a high voter turnout for the parties that were most active on SM during the campaigning phase of the latest German Bundestag elections (tagesschau, 2025, fig. 1). This underlines their overall high use of SM platforms for news consumption, political content and participation (Hasebrink et al., 2021, p. 47). Secondly, another relevance of this target group lies in the noted increase of radicalization through SM, specifically in young adults between 15 and 24 years (Akram and Nasar, 2023, p. 279). However, political participation may play out differently on different SM platforms. This may e.g. be due to different interfaces or varying algorithmic configurations. Therefore, this study specifically investigates young adults’ engagement with political content on IG. This choice proves relevant, as it is the most used SM network in Germany among 14- to 29-year-olds (Kaiser, 2025, para. 3), thus including the target group of this work. Secondly, as Lalancette and Raynauld (2019) point out, scholarship concerned with political communication on IG is yet at an “exploratory stage” (p. 894), indicating another research gap to address.

This study operates based on ten exploratory semi-structured interviews and thematic analysis for flexible and creative, yet structured discovery of patterns and themes. The results of this work should not only cater to the societal and scientific relevance outlined earlier, but should further be recognized as an emphasis of the urgent need for more scholarly engagement with the concept of CML in the eye of ongoing political and technological developments. This thesis may thereby function as a fruitful starting point for crucial future research and democratic societal progress.

Finally, the following research question will be guiding: *How do German young adults draw on CML*

*when engaging with political content on IG?* To facilitate approaching an answer to this question, the following three sub-questions should be posed:

1. *What engagement patterns do German young adults exhibit in relation to political content on IG?*
2. *What motivations underlie these engagement patterns?*
3. *In what ways do CML skills inform the engagement motivations and patterns?*

### **1.3. Structure**

First, the theoretical framework will be presented. It includes a thorough introduction to and definition of the concept of CML, enriched by a detailed conceptualization that addresses the different applicabilities of CML in practice. Then, the framework is extended by elaborating upon the concept of Political Participation and its connection to young adults' SM usage. Consequently, the methodology of this study is presented. Starting with the research design, the methodological choices, data collection, sampling strategy, operationalization, data analysis and methodological limitations are addressed and justified. The chapter closes with ethical considerations. Next, the results section displays and discusses the findings from the thematic analysis, before the conclusion of this thesis summarizes the key points in answering the research questions, highlights theoretical implications, points at limitations of this work, and finally ends with suggestions for future research.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

To approach the research question, CML will first be introduced as the primary analytical lens. Then, a concise literature review of young adults' SM usage and political participation will complete the theoretical framework.

### 2.1. Critical Media Literacy

#### 2.1.1. Definition

Media Literacy (ML) is defined by the U.S. National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE, n.d.) as “the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication” (para. 1). It is a skill to encode and decode, to “synthesize, analyze and produce” (NAMLE, n.d., para. 4) mediated symbols and messages. As such, ML is considered a key competency for citizens and specifically young adults to navigate the digital public sphere and become active participants in a democratic society (Mihailidis and Thevenin, 2013, p. 1611; Schröder, 2021, p. 208). CML extends this concept by adding a *critical* perspective, rooted in cultural studies and critical pedagogy. While this general understanding of CML is shared across the field, Potter (2023, p. 124) highlights the current lack of and urgent need for a clear and shared vision of the term, specifically regarding the meaning of ‘critical’. Although CML is becoming an increasingly relevant concept and skill set under current social, political, and technological developments, scholars have failed to create an effective and communicative scholarly community with a shared approach to their field (Potter, 2023, pp. 111, 122-125). Thus, with significant definitional variation and few overlaps, CML has even been called a “somewhat slippery concept at best and a misappropriated one at worst” (Wright, 2020, p. 2). With this scholarly status in mind, the definition of CML for this thesis's theoretical framework draws upon different key works of the field. This creates connections and contributes to a less individualized, but more collective and exhaustive understanding. After all, as Potter (2023) argues, relying on only one or two publications and their individual visions of CML would rather “balkanize the area into many niches, each with its own echo chamber” (p. 123), instead of leading to a definition that more holistically approaches the concept's complexity.

The key aim of CML's critical perspective is to improve democracy. This is to be done by encouraging citizens to create a “critical consciousness” (Freire, 1970, as cited in Mihailidis and Thevenin, 2013, p. 1615), that leads to informing oneself, understanding, competently reflecting upon and engaging with ideologies and media representations of societal issues like power, oppression or discrimination based on e.g. sexuality, ethnicity or religion (Kellner and Share, 2007b, p. 61, 63; Kellner and Share, 2019, p. 6; Potter, 2023, p. 115). As such, CML i.a. allows for detecting stereotypes and biases in messages, uncovering misinformation and disinformation, or even propaganda. Notably, this power of CML does not only hold true for seemingly obvious and easily detectable issues, but specifically for subliminal, internalized, supposedly invisible, yet often structural phenomena. As Ferguson (1998) argues by the metaphor of an iceberg: “The vast bulk which is not immediately visible is the intellectual, historical and analytical base without which media analysis runs the risk of becoming superficial, mechanical or glib” (p. 2). Kellner and Share



(2007b) add, that only through a critical lens that takes the ‘below-surface’ aspects of the media iceberg into consideration, will citizens be able to critically explore “the role of language and communication (...)[,] relationships of power and domination (...) [and] ideological notions of white supremacy, capitalist patriarchy, classism, homophobia, and other oppressive myths” (p. 62). A good example for this is an underlying and often overseen phenomenon highlighted by Megarry in her book *The limitations of social media feminism*: Arguing that SM platforms are no space for safety, but rather environments of false empowerment for women and feminism (Megarry, 2020b, p. 134-136), she denotes how the male ownership and control of SM platforms simultaneously situates women and feminist material, historical archival thereof, and ultimately feminist independence in male ownership and control as well (Megarry, 2020a, p. 216). However, this only becomes apparent when critically approaching and reflecting on underlying structures, ideologies, and the “immateriality” (Megarry, 2020a, p. 217) of SM by means of a critical consciousness.

Beyond fostering critical media consumption through dismantling blatant or subliminal oppressive ideologies and structures, CML also advocates for more reflective and selective *production* of media texts. Thereby, it can e.g. function as a deliberating tool for self-creation and -expression or activist purposes (Wright, 2020, p. 2; Kellner and Share, 2019, p. 6) that enable citizens to challenge existing “narratives” (Kellner and Share, 2007b, p. 60) and “‘common-sense’ assumptions” (p. 63). As such, CML is also considered as granting citizens agency and voice (Kellner, 2005, p. 372). However, while marginalized individuals or groups who experience structural oppression and often have little agency to self-represent or speak up may benefit from this (Kellner and Share, 2007b, p. 61), CML should be approached more critically and not be celebrated without considerate reflection. After all, the accessibility to the benefits of CML is subject to the digital divide. The latter describes the in-/accessibility of digital media, constrained through “economic, social, and cultural capital” (Yin and Sun, 2021, p. 1188), and has also been referred to as digital inequality, in aim to foreground “the positionality of individuals within multiple systems of power” (Zheng and Walsham, 2021, p. 4). In the eye of digital inequality, it thus becomes clear that CML not only holds economic, social, or cultural capital-related limitations, but also those ingrained in, e.g., the technological character of digital media, such as accessibility through physical ability. Therefore, people that are disadvantaged by digital inequality may not benefit from said empowerment through CML through limited to no access to ICTs, let alone any ML or CML education. Thus, it has to be stressed that an overtly positive perception of CML and its ability to empower people should be refrained from. While criticism on the concept will be further extended in subchapter 2.1.3. *Criticism*, it should already be said that CML must not be mistaken as a deliberating tool to free citizens from oppression, but rather as a means to make such structures visible.

### 2.1.2. Conceptualization

After this first introduction to the concept, the question of the conceptualization of CML remains. In other words, what does the concept teach specifically, and how can CML skills be categorized? As hinted at in the foregone subchapter, CML includes manifold applicabilities to discover obvious and

subliminal notions. Several key works for conceptualizing CML have been provided by Kellner and Share, including a paper that, based on an extensive body of existing literature, presents “six (...) conceptual understandings” (Kellner and Share, 2019, p. 8) as a guiding framework. Additionally, a recent critical analysis of the current state of research by Potter (2023, pp. 113-115, 117-120) extends this framework, providing a comprehensive overview of how scholars across the field have described CML's applicabilities and gaps differently. Building on both works and on insights from other scholars, the following parts will conceptualize CML along the lines of *who* created a media product, *how*, by what representational *means*, with which *intention* and *implicit meanings*, as well as in consideration of an audience's *positionality*. In regard to this work's purpose of studying German young adults' application of CML in their engagement with political content on IG, the conceptualization and understanding of CML is specifically crucial, as representation “enacts and sustains political identities” (Rodarte and Lukito, 2024, p. 2).

### Authorship

This first basic conceptualization of CML refers to understanding *who* stands behind the creation of a media product, or *who* assisted in it. This is a crucial starting point of reflection, as an author's personal values and beliefs have a strong impact on the underlying intentions to create a media product in the first place, as well as on the motivations to design that product in a certain way by certain means (Hall, 1980, p. 134; Potter, 2023, p. 11). However, recent technological developments have made it harder to identify authorship. As such, e.g. anonymity on SM platforms, or even the creation of media texts through AI play a great role. As authorship becomes harder to identify, it is of great significance for audiences to be critical of and reflect on what they are seeing (Klinger and Svensson, 2024, p. 41). Relating to this work's research focus, CML in terms of awareness of authorship can thus enable young adults to avoid being mislead or influenced involuntarily or even without notice by the political content they engage with. It enables them to e.g. reflect on a political statement, its implicit meanings and intentions, through understanding who the author is and what they stand for. By that, young adults may make more reflective decisions about who and what to believe and agree with, or not.

### Means of Production

By a focus on means of production, CML should be conceptualized as a tool to discover and reflect on decisions made by authors to convey meaning. In this regard, representation plays a great role and refers to two key aspects: (1) representation through language and semiotics, and (2) representation through in-/visibility.

First, language and semiotics should be turned to. This conceptualization is also part of Kellner and Share's (2019b, p. 8) framework, and relates to reflecting on the “reality creating capacity” (Philips, 1999, p. 194) of language, grammar, and semiotic choices. After all, such choices affect the construction, delivery and accessibility of a text (Kellner and Share, 2019, p. 8) and thereby affect the way people feel, believe, think and act. Through enforcing such power over people, the choice of words and semiotics can reinforce, challenge, and transform hegemonic ideologies (Ahearn, 2012., p. 263), which, as noted before, is a key aim of CML. Being aware of decisions in language allows to

further question intentions behind a production. What may it mean, if an author chooses to use highly professional language, as opposed to jargon? What does it imply for the intended audience, if braille is included? Who do such choices in- or exclude, address or ignore, and what cultural or economic capital do they presuppose? As a person's "linguistic or symbolic capital" (Ahearn, 2012, p. 271) plays a significant role in media accessibility, an author's active choice and underlying motivation for it carries meaning and therefore requires consideration. Moreover, language or semiotics are not always clear and one-sided, but can instead carry subliminal and manifold meanings, such as through sarcasm, irony, or simply metaphors. Relating to the research purpose of this paper, young adults may e.g. use awareness of such representational choices to question which people are intentionally addressed or excluded, and which underlying ideology or oppression that may reinforce and thereby uncover, e.g., aims of persuasion or polarization.

The second aspect of representation relates to in-/visibility. This is to say that authors and institutions behind SM platforms make active choices about what to make in-/visible to their audiences and thereby enforce their own worldviews or ideologies. Besides the decisions made by creators of media texts, the algorithmically driven recommender systems, which all major SM platforms are based on, play a great role in the in-/visibility of content (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020, p. 1). In relation to this, the concept of *algorithmic audiencing* should shortly be mentioned. Introduced by Riemer and Peter (2021), it refers to the impact of algorithms on free speech, through "amplifying or suppressing" (p. 409) content in a way that best benefits the SM company's economic situation. As they argue, this "distorts the free and fair exchange of ideas in public discourse" (p. 409) and thus impacts the human right to freedom of speech. While everyone may be able to speak and post, freedom is limited, if people are unequally and uncontrollably able to be heard (Riemer and Peter, 2021, p. 410). Further, if algorithms favor the representation of what generates most user engagement and thus the highest economic gain, then a real danger for democracy and overall societal well-being arises, as negative, more aggressive and harming contents draw most online attention (Klinger and Svensson, 2024, p. 38; Riemer and Peter, 2021, p. 410, 422). Ultimately, this can lead to polarization and radicalization, or the formation of filter bubbles (Kahne et al., 2012, p. 4; Riemer and Peter, 2021, p. 417), which are said to algorithmically reassure users' views through repetitive exposure to similar content that they and their peer network engage with most (Marquart et al., 2020, p. 203). Adding to the influence of user engagement and algorithms on representation, users should be aware that "participation online is highly skewed" (Klinger and Svensson, 2024, p. 37). Most people are said to only passively consume and rarely show active engagement in terms of, e.g., liking, commenting, or sharing (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020, p. 2). Strikingly, the low level of active user engagement on Facebook thus leads to a definition of hyperactive users as such, who only write three or more comments or give three or more likes (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020, p. 7). The danger of such a small and one-sided creator segment is that it influences recommender systems into thinking that the opinions of these few active users and creators are the most relevant, as they are the ones who show the highest engagement with the platform and thus receive most attention. Therefore, Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2020) write: "[H]yperactive users asymmetrically influence the popularity of political content [which] recommender algorithms might also replicate (...) [and thus] denote a form of algorithmic manipulation of political communication" (p. 2). In conclusion, CML in

terms of representation that refers to in-/visibility thus, i.a., aims to detect *what* values or ideologies a specific media text portrays or hides, and how in-/visibility is influenced through underlying systems like algorithms. Through discovering and questioning the inclusion- or absence-choices of ideologies and the impact of a medium on a message (Kellner and Share, 2019, p. 8), young adults who engage with political content on SM may thus detect and counter manipulation and polarization.

### Intentions

As hinted at in the previous sections, CML further allows to discover and reflect on the underlying intentions of media products. One crucial motivation to be considered has already been highlighted in the foregone section on algorithmic audiencing and its role in the “economic nature of the media” (Potter, 2023, p. 119). Notably, not only big tech companies, but also smaller brands or people of public interest, like influencers, can financially benefit from SM platforms, marking economic growth as a fundamental motivation for content production. Another angle to approach the production and institutional intentions behind media texts relates to political or ideological agendas, e.g., for activist or populist mobilization of broader audiences for societal or political influence. On the one hand, this can relate to SM companies and their political agendas, as has recently been observed in the US, where X-owner Elon Musk embodied significant political influence through his platform regulations. In the eye of big tech companies’ political interests, users thus need to be aware of the fact that platform owners can establish “explicit rules for what content to promote or suppress” (Riemer and Peter, 2021, p. 416) and may thereby advance their own economic and socio-political values. On the other hand, SM users like brands, activists, partisans, or even sports- and beauty-influencers can also have political motivations behind their posts. In the eye of current technological and political developments accompanied by less usage of traditional news outlets, people thus need to be aware of the fact that SM are very accessible tools to circumvent established media and spread self-created, highly opinionated, partisan and mobilizing (dis)information (Lee et al., 2013, p. 675; Marquart et al., 2020, p. 203). Ultimately, when engaging with political content on IG, CML thus enables young adults to ask: For what purpose is this post created? With what intention does the content aim to persuade me? Who has which benefit in mind, while posting this piece of political content? CML aims to foster critical awareness of media texts’ underlying intentions or motivations in order to be less prone to being unconsciously persuaded.

### Audience Positionality

Based on this last conceptualization of CML, the impact of groups’ or individuals’ contexts on perceiving a text differently should be emphasized (Kellner and Share, 2019, p. 8; Potter, 2023, p. 119). Contexts can e.g. be of socio-cultural, political or religious character (Kellner and Share, 2019, p. 54, 72), but also more private and situative, such as emotions, personal interests (Potter, 2023, p. 119), experience, or an audience’s relation to a media text or its creator. This aligns with Stuart Hall’s Encoding/Decoding model, in which Hall (1980, p. 134) argues that audiences do not simply passively receive and understand information as the author intended, but instead actively interpret it, based on their own backgrounds. As such, when someone, e.g., encounters and aims to evaluate a political post on IG, they should reflect on their own socio-political standing, the creators’ position,

and that of possible other consumers. After all, a liberal person's interpretation could e.g. vastly differ from that of a conservative one, but also a Westernized ideology can lead to very different and one-sided understandings, if no reflection and consideration of other perspectives takes place. Hence, while engaging with political content on SM, young adults being aware of their positionality and that of others, allows for a more nuanced evaluation of media texts, and earlier detection of stereotypes, misinformation, hegemonic ideologies, propaganda, etc., ultimately allowing for reflective decisions on agreeing with or challenging them.

### *2.1.3. Criticism*

Although the last sections have highlighted a row of positive considerations and impacts of CML on (social) media consumption, criticism of the concept also exists. First, Polizzi (2025, p. 2) specifically criticizes the perception of CML as progressive and politically left. He argues that CML is also a vital part of other, non-left or supposedly progressive ideologies and stresses the need to refrain from politicizing it and avoid reserving critical user autonomy for any ideology. Supporting Polizzi's argument, a preference for algorithmic content curation was noted in people with extreme political views on either end of the spectrum, as it allows them to possibly "avoid challenging information" (Möller et al., 2020b, p. 627). As such, political orientation cannot be automatically considered a positive or negative factor for CML.

Secondly, another point of critique towards CML lies in its measurement and practical use. The concept's reliability is considered unstable, as individuals tend to overestimate their skills (Leeder, 2019, p. 8), which may produce misleading outcomes in e.g., self-report questionnaires. Even if CML is included in educational programs, the depth and accuracy of its practical implementation in people's everyday life and digital media use requires further investigation. As Bulger and Davison (2018, p. 12) highlight, evidence for the practical usefulness to, e.g., detect misinformation through ML is still lacking.

Third, an additional and widely shared criticism of CML is that the concept puts great responsibility for the critical and successful encoding or decoding of media texts in the hands of citizens (Bulger and Davison, 2018, p. 3, 11). This is to say, that users are expected to correctly interpret content in the way it was intended by the creator. However, as noted before in reference to Stuart Hall (1980, p. 134), en- and decoding of a message depends on people's individual backgrounds, which includes their cultural capital, whereby aspects of digital inequality affect the ability to critically and successfully encode or decode a text. Thus, putting the responsibility on users to generally correctly and critically en- or decode messages, vastly disregards their individual contextual backgrounds and knowingly runs the risk of fostering the spread of misunderstood content and thus the creation of a misinformed, distorted discourse. Further, the shifting of this responsibility onto users not only includes the encoding and decoding of content they actively encounter on their SM feeds, but also of such content which they *do not* see. In other words, audiences are made responsible for being "aware and mindful of algorithmic audiencing" (Riemer and Peter, 2021, p. 417), and to reflect both on what platforms show them, as well as on which content is actively hidden or at least hindered from being seen. Thence, for critically approaching media texts, users are

required to actively search for information beyond their personalized feeds. This shift of responsibility is concerning for two main reasons: Firstly, an increase of individual civic responsibility takes responsibility off of “the community, state, institutions, or developers of technologies” (Bulger and Davison, 2018, p. 3) and is specifically dangerous considering the misconception of people’s own CML level. While informed citizenship is key to a functioning society and political engagement (Eskens et al., 2017, p. 264), the responsibility of states and institutions to protect citizens and users has to be emphasized and tends to be overlooked under the progressive, powerful image of individual CML. Secondly, questioning content and aiming for additional sources requires mental and cognitive capacities and a desire to gain trustworthy information. However, this, is again subject to aspects of digital inequality, and further appears to not be relevant for all: The “convenience and choice delivered” (Newman et al., 2024, p. 17) by algorithms in addition to limited user capacities to fact-check tends to leave people less critical about the origin and accuracy of content (Diepeveen and Pinet, 2022, p. 9). Moreover, Klinger and Svensson (2024) highlight a “news-finds-me perception” (p. 36) in people who use SM for news consumption, which leads to users “feeling informed even when they are not, relying on peers for information, and not actively seeking news anymore” (p. 36). Relying on content curated by friends and followers is highly prominent amongst young adults and proves to be specifically dangerous, as it can lead to uncritical diffusion of misinformation based on the trust in (personal) relations (Marquart et al., 2020, p. 203).

Fourth, critique relating to the general accessibility of CML exists. Learning about, understanding, and applying CML requires a range of presupposed cognitive skills and socio-cultural capital. A person with a lower education level, little critical consciousness, and less knowledge about systems that operate behind the screens, such as capitalism or geopolitical alliances, may be disadvantaged in acquiring CML skills and applying them. Said differently, digital inequality not only plays a role in how CML can be applied, but also in how CML skills can be acquired in the first place. Following Bulger and Davison (2018), the question remains of “how an individual can assess the reliability of information” (p. 11), when “differences in web skills relate to socio-economic status” (p. 11). Lastly, a final critical remark that also touches upon digital inequality and CML relates to education and age. Although this thesis is concerned with young adults, so that the aspect does not directly apply, it has to be noted that generally CML education is pointed chiefly at young generations and not adults. However, lower education impacts citizens *regardless* of age (Bulger and Davison, 2018, p. 3). As such, more CML research and educational programs should be directed at older people.

In conclusion, CML aims to improve democracy through equipping citizens with skills to detect, evaluate and “[deconstruct] injustices, [express] their own voices, and [struggle] to create a better society” (Kellner and Share, 2005, p. 382), as well as to thereby counter the growing and unregulated spread of mis- and disinformation (Leeder, 2019, p. 8; Diepeveen and Pinet, 2022, p. 2). The four conceptualizations have highlighted different use-cases and approaches of CML, suggesting more detailed ways in which it can contribute to democratic, civic participation online. Against this

backdrop, the reflected use of CML as the key focus of this thesis will allow for more nuanced insights on how young adults engage with political content on IG.

## **2.2. Political Participation, SM, and Young Adults**

Political participation is usually defined in relation to parliaments and elections, understanding and dis-/favoring politicians, evaluating representatives' decisions, and conversing thereof (Eskens et al., 2017, p. 264). In its traditional perception, it thus refers to actions which aim to directly "[influence] political power" (Polizzi, 2025, p. 2). However, in this thesis, the definitional approach proposed by Polizzi (2025, p. 2) should be added, which frames political participation as civic engagement that reflects "what matters to citizens, regardless of their [political] impact" (Polizzi, 2025, p. 2). This definition is relevant, as political content on SM platforms like IG is not necessarily about or by governmental actors, but also tends to be of rather informative, educational, or opinionated character with socio-political value, and is shared by peer networks (Marquart et al., 2020, p. 201). Examples could thus be posts that address political developments and news, feminism, sexism, ethnic discrimination, religious hate, capitalism, or issues of sustainability. Besides official governmental actors, accounts are thence also curated by e.g. Non-Governmental-Organizations (NGO's), free journalists, political initiatives and groups, public figures or simply every-day-people who decide to use SM, or respectively IG, for disseminating political content or their political opinion to a wider audience.

Notably, online engagement with political content is considered to be often unplanned, yet accepted as "incidental exposure" (Möller et al., 2020b, p. 619) and may still politically meaningful, even if young people mostly use SM for socializing and entertainment purposes (Kahne and Bowyer, 2018, p. 473). In that sense, Bakker and Vreese (2011, p. 465) highlight that even *non*-informational, but entertaining SM usage can positively impact young adults' political participation. Having grown up with different types of digital media, people from younger generations are often referred to as *digital natives*, said to be highly skilled and invested in navigating new technologies, engaging with political content online and sharing their (political) stances with their networks (Möller et al., 2014, p. 690). As highlighted in the introduction, their news consumption increasingly occurs through video-based platforms like YouTube, TikTok, and IG, which leads to a decreasing affiliation with traditional outlets (Newman et al., 2024, p. 10, 12). Therefore, SM like IG are highly relevant for younger citizens' exposure to and engagement with political information, and thus crucial for their political socialization and participation (Lalancette and Raynauld, 2019, p. 918; Lee et al., 2013, p. 687).

A key value of SM for young adults lies in their multimedia and participatory character, as it facilitates the processing of political information (Lee et al., 2013, p. 687; Möller et al., 2018, p. 447). Some typical forms of such participation include chatting, posting, and tagging (Kahne and Bowyer, 2018, pp. 476-477). Overall, the possibilities offered by SM platforms for political actors and (young) citizens to put forth their interests, share opinions, and interact with each other about topics of societal or political value have thus created new ways of political participation and influencing society (Papakyriakopoulos et al., 2020, p. 2). Papakyriakopoulos et al. (2020, p. 1) frame this as a transformation of political communication through SM. However, political

communication can play out differently on different SM platforms (Kahne and Bowyer, 2018, p. 471), which for setting a focus on IG in this work is helpful to gain deeper insights. IG was launched in 2010 and hosts “two billion monthly active users worldwide” (Dixon, 2025, para. 2). As indicated in the introduction, it is the most used SM platform amongst Germans between the age of 14 to 29 (Kaiser, 2025, para. 3). From the creative-perspective, it mainly allows users to create and share content through various visual forms, including photos, reels, slideshows of photos and videos, and stories (posts that disappear after 24-hours). Further, the platform offers a vast range of possibilities to engage with other people, friends or strangers, through e.g. following accounts, commenting under posts, tagging others, or sending private messages. Aligning with the mentioned insights from research on political participation and SM overall, regular use of specifically IG, as well as news consumption through it, have been found to positively correlate with users’ political participation (Matthes et al., 2023, p. 7; van Cauwenberge and Broersma, 2017, as cited in Al-Rawi et al., 2021, p. 306).



### 3. Method

Based on ten semi-structured interviews and thorough thematic analysis, this work adds to the identified qualitative research gap concerned with CML, SM, and political participation. As stated before, the precise focus lies on how German young adults' engagement with political content on IG is informed by CML. The following sections present the methodology of this study, including thorough definitions and justifications. First, an overview of the research design will be presented, addressing the methodological choices, data collection, sampling strategy, operationalization, data analysis, and methodological limitations. Finally, ethical considerations will be discussed.

#### 3.1. Research Design

##### 3.1.1. Methodological Choices

As stated in the introduction, CML, SM, and political participation research have predominantly been conducted from a quantitative perspective. To add to this gap of deeper insights that allow for meaning-making, this thesis therefore adopts an exploratory qualitative approach. The exploratory attitude grants flexibility and pragmatism during the research process. It is an approach that aims to discover data that is more specific than a generic investigation of a field, yet less narrowly focused than exploration for invention (Davies, 2006, p. 110). As exploratory research is foundational for theory building (Davies, 2006, p. 110), it poses a valuable addition of insights to the identified scholarly gap. Qualitative research itself is considered a “holistic and indepth approach” (Schreier, 2018, p. 84) that allows for understanding, describing, and explaining a phenomenon from within (Flick, 2018, p. 5). It aims to make meaning of how and why people act the way they do, how they experience, perceive, and create the world around them, instead of seeking an absolute *truth* (Barbour, 2018, p. 225; Flick, 2018, p. 5). In terms of this thesis, the qualitative approach thus specifically allows for learning more about the motivations and patterns of young German adults' engagement with political content on IG, and the role of CML skills within.

For collecting such in-depth data, conducting interviews is a suitable and renowned qualitative method (Roulston and Choi, 2018, p. 243). Allowing for data collection through an interactive relationship between the researcher and participants, interviews have also been framed as “conversations with a purpose” (Barbour, 2018, p. 222). This study specifically applies *semi-structured* interviews, which operate along the lines of an interview guide (Appendix B) with open-ended questions, yet foster flexibility in terms of spontaneously engaging further or less with what participants say (Roulston and Choi, 2018, p. 233). Thus, the interview guide functions as an orientational agenda, a red line, to ensure that all necessary questions are asked and topics are touched upon logically. The flexibility allows interviewees and the researcher to emphasize certain aspects or add points, even if they were not considered in the topic guide, e.g., by posing follow-up questions. Therefore, semi-structured interviews are considered a strongly participant-led research method (Roulston and Choi, 2018, p. 233).

Lastly, another important methodological decision for the data analysis that should be considered to increase the credibility of this research is the language of conduct. Resch and Enzenhofer (2018) note that failing to address cross-language decisions in research can pose an issue of “presentation or

transparency” (p. 131). This is because the choice of words in translations can vary, distort, or modify meanings (Resch and Enzenhofer, 2018, p. 132) and thus affect the interpretation and outcomes of a dataset and consequently the validity of a study. Thus, for clarity: While the theoretical background and concepts were engaged with in English, the interviews with the German young adults were conducted and transcribed in German. Only the interview guide and quotes used for the results section of this thesis were translated. Translation was done by the researcher, who is bilingual and a native German speaker.

### *3.1.2. Data Collection*

Data collection in qualitative research is the process of selecting and producing “linguistic (or visual) material for analyzing and understanding phenomena, social fields, subjective and collective experiences, and the related meaning-making processes” (Flick, 2018, p. 7). For this study, data was collected in a linear-sequential manner, meaning that collection was completed before analysis begun (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018, p. 49). After agreeing to participate in the study and setting an interview date, all respondents were sent an informed consent form, which they could either sign or agree to verbally in the beginning of the interview. As participants were sought for through IG (see Sampling Procedure subchapter), their current location was unknown during the recruitment process. Ultimately, it turned out that all participants resided at locations too far away for the researcher to travel to for face-to-face interviews. Therefore, the interviews were conducted via video call on the platform ‘Teams’, circumventing additional financial and timely hurdles that in-person interviews would have posed. Conducting the interviews online had the benefit of facilitating recording directly through the video call platform, allowing for transcription right after the interview and precise engagement with the answers during analysis. For reaching a saturated dataset and after a pilot interview that allowed for testing the interview guide (Maxwell, 2018, p. 27), 10 semi-structured interviews of 45 to 75 minutes were conducted by the author of this study. The interview guide set an agenda, yet offered flexibility for follow-up questions and thus individual foci on each participant’s experiences. It was based on the foregone theoretical framework and the following operationalization of concepts, and thereby allowed for the collection of rich data (Barbour, 2018, p. 227). As suggested by Roulston and Choi (2018, p. 238), the interviews were openly formulated and went from general questions to more specific ones. At the end, participants were given room to add or emphasize anything that had or had not been talked about. Then, they were debriefed and the video calls terminated.

### *3.1.3. Sampling Criteria*

Although it is not the aim of a qualitative study to generate statistically generalizable results (Schreier, 2018, p. 85), a sample as representative of the target population as possible is desirable to cater to the social relevance of the research. After all, representativeness may allow for transferability, a “reconceptualization of generalization in qualitative research” (Schreier, 2018, p. 86) concerned with how far findings from one case relate to or can be transferred to other cases and contexts. Therefore, the key sampling criteria were: age (18-24 years), nationality (German), general

political interest, and regular IG usage and engagement with political content on the platform. The age and nationality criteria were highly relevant, as they presupposed by the research question, which is based on the scholarly gap and societal relevance elaborated in the introduction and theoretical framework. To remind, the respective age group has been identified as a key demographic of news and political content consumers on SM both within Germany and internationally (Newman et al., 2024, p. 14; Hasebrink et al., 2021, p. 47). Further, researching this specific age group and focussing on the German nationality is crucial to better understand the processes of political socialization and participation on SM platforms in the eye of increasing criminal right-wing online radicalization and organization of young citizens in Germany, as well as in regard of the most recent federal election results of young voters, which showed high numbers on both the left and right end of the political spectrum. General political interest, regular IG usage and engagement with political content on the platform posed additional crucial inclusion criteria, as without regular exposure to, interest in and engagement with political content on IG, a participant would not have been relevant to this study's research focus on engagement patterns, motivations and the application of CML skills. General political interest was assessed by asking study applicants about their personal interest in political topics and what they define as political. Applying IG usage as a criteria was, as noted, justified by it being the most used SM platform in Germany amongst 14- to 29-year-olds (Kaiser, 2025, para. 3). Regularity of IG usage and engagement with political content on the platform were fulfilled at a minimum of every other day.

#### *3.1.4. Sampling Procedure*

To recruit participants for this study, the purposive sampling strategy *criterion sampling* was applied. This was to create a sample that matches the profile defined by the inclusion criteria, and is known to be specifically valuable for in-depth exploration of a phenomenon (Schreier, 2018, p. 93). Field access was facilitated through direct use of the platform of interest (IG), where the study was promoted and contact with possible participants was established through the researcher's IG account. This was to ensure the inclusion criteria of SM and precisely IG use, while further increasing the possibility of directly reaching young German adults with political interest, as the researchers' IG account is public and politically positioned. Further, acquisition of participants through IG was promising in terms of the feasibility to quickly reach a broad audience, compared to alternative sampling strategies of e.g. asking young people in the streets to participate. Further, the indirect connection of applicants to the researcher through following her IG account may have functioned as a leap of faith, suggesting reliability and possibly raising a desire to contribute to the researcher's work. Such a preposition of trust and connection that fosters a will to help and contribute may have been different with complete strangers elsewhere, who stand in no relation to the researcher at all.

After posting an informational story post with all relevant information and inclusion criteria of the study (Appendix D), the researcher's peer network was asked to share the search query for participants. This was done, so that a broader audience could be reached and private contacts could be avoided. Out of 16 applications, 10 interviewees were purposely selected after careful evaluation of their fulfillment of the inclusion criteria and under consideration of demographic diversity. This

was necessary, as, first of all, more female than male identifying people applied to participate, and secondly, as three people had to be rejected because of not fulfilling the requirement of regular IG usage and encounter of political content on the platform. However, demographic diversity was limited by only politically left-leaning young adults with high education levels applying to participate. While this was first seen as a weakness, it was quickly considered a helpful further focus, which could lead to deeper understandings of a more specific target group. Ultimately, the sampling procedure thus led to six female- and four male-identifying participants with an average age of 23. All were enrolled university students in bachelor or master programs and had the German nationality. As noted, each participant indicated a political orientation to the left throughout the interviews. Further, each of the ten said they turned to IG as their main source for consumption of political content (including news) and had first used the platform between the age of 12 to 15. Appendix A, Table A1, provides an anonymized overview of all participants.

### *3.1.5. Operationalization*

The guiding analytical concepts of this study are engagement, political content and participation, as well as CML on IG. Based on the theoretical framework provided earlier, their operationalization should be made transparent. Operationalization is a valuable methodological step that firstly facilitates the creation of a theoretically based interview guide. Further, it allows for the structural identification of patterns and themes during thematic analysis, enabling precise evaluation of what counts as data meaningful to the research, while remaining open to new meanings and codes. Moreover, a clear operationalization increases the credibility and validity of the study, facilitating replication of the research by other scholars. The following section thus presents indicators of said concepts.

#### Engagement on IG

First, engagement on IG is classified along the lines of five variables: Passive, interactive, creative, and affective engagement. Passive engagement is, i.a., indicated by actions like scrolling through IG, looking at and processing content mentally, but only observing it without interacting further. However, such passiveness does not automatically suggest disinterest. Rather, it also has to be taken into account that an active decision to stay passive and simply observe, or to not engage further with a certain piece of content may still be recognized as an intentional pattern of engagement. Second, interactive engagement is indicated through actions such as liking, sharing, saving, tagging, as well two-way activities that i.a. include commenting on content from others, as well as engaging in conversations or discussions on the platform. Sharing e.g. relates to participants reposting something in their own story or forwarding a post to a friend through direct messaging. In instances of engaging in discussion, respondents, e.g., exchange thoughts in the comment section, tag other users in replies to make them aware of a certain post or respond to them directly, or simply use hashtags to support the visibility and connection of a particular movement or community. Third, creative engagement is indicated through active content creation of the interviewee, meaning, e.g., uploading a photo, sharing a self-created story or reel, as well as the creative decisions made within

such processes like writing a caption, headline, including hashtags, tagging others, etc. Fourth, affective engagement is indicated when study participants show emotions towards political content they encounter, such as anger, despair, joy, or even empowerment. The different patterns of and motivations for engagement were addressed in the second main part of the interview. Addressing, i.a., the most used types of engagement, emotions while engaging, and underlying intentions, questions as the following were asked: ‘Why do you engage or not engage with political content?’, or ‘In how far does your engagement vary when you encounter political content that matches your own opinion, versus when it goes against it?’.

### Political Content

Next, defining what counts as political content is relevant, as this research focuses on young adults’ engagement with specifically such content. Otherwise, including engagement with non-political content would risk distorting the findings and failing the research aim. Based on the theoretical framework, political content refers to (1) governmental politics and news, such as policies, elections, parties, (2) societal or socio-political issues, such as e.g. feminism, ableism, racism, migration, sustainability, (3) ideology, meaning posts that support or challenge e.g. particular worldviews like capitalism, nationalism, or patriarchy, (4) mobilization, such as activist content, online petitions and campaigns, or information about protest movements, and finally, (5) content that consists of political satire/criticism, such as memes or ironic posts to critique existing political/power structures or political phenomena. Based on this operationalization, the interview’s main part started with a focus on the political content that participants encountered on IG. Questions such as ‘What do you like or dislike about the way that political content is presented on IG?’, or ‘In how far do you trust or distrust the political content you see on IG?’ were asked.

### CML on IG

Finally, CML should be addressed. Although, as discussed in the theoretical framework, the concept still lacks a concise and shared scholarly definition, a few key aspects should be used for a clear operationalization. As such, CML is indicated through (1) awareness of representational structures, such as bias or framing, both through visual, audible and text, including e.g. choice of language and semiotics, (2) recognition of misinformation, disinformation, or propagandistic content, (3) awareness of agenda and norms, including e.g. authorship, media ownership and creator motivations, as well as (4) positionality, referring to the acknowledgement of context, subjective interpretation of media texts and consideration of one’s own internalized norms/biases, as well as impacts of digital inequality, and lastly (5) identification of empowerment through media texts, including e.g. critical and creative media creation to grant agency and voice. In the interviews, CML was purposefully avoided to be explicitly addressed, in order to avoid the danger of participants wanting to present themselves as ‘good’, ‘aware’, ‘very critical’ users. Instead, the questions were formulated in an open way that left room for replies to include aspects of CML naturally, without labeling it as such. This was to counter the aforementioned danger of self-evaluation and -presentation of CML skills highlighted by Leeder (2019, p. 8), arguing that individuals tend to overestimate them (see section 2.1.3 *Criticism on CML*).

### 3.1.6. Data Analysis

For making sense of the data, thematic analysis was conducted with the help of the MAXQDA software. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method to examine datasets, such as transcripts from interviews (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 86), and operates based on three coding stages. These enable identification, analysis, organization, description, and reporting of recurring patterns or themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 78-79, 83), which are turned into categories and ultimately support the “production of (...) definite findings” (Boeije, 2010, p. 94). These definite findings lay a sound foundation for answering the guiding research question.

The three coding stages are called open-, axial-, and selective coding and are used to first segment the collected data bulk into small bits, before reassembling them into logical thematic categories (Boeije, 2010, pp. 94-95). Notably, they allow for iteration, which enables the revision of data sets and going back and forth until thematic saturation is reached. Thematic saturation is desirable, as it means that new data does not add new insights, but fits within pre-used codes (Boeije, 2010, p. 107). This minimizes the possibility of overlooking valuable findings. Further, the thematic analysis of this study was conducted inductively, meaning that all data was only analytically engaged with *after* complete collection and with the aim of coming to a clear statement (Barbour, 2018, p. 222; Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018, p. 51). As an inductive approach fosters the development of codes *during* analysis, it is data-driven, as opposed to *deductive* analysis, in which researchers work along existing coding frames with established categories (Braun and Clarke, 2006, pp. 83-84).

In preparation for the analysis, the interview recordings were transcribed and anonymized, in order to protect the participants' privacy. Further, the transcripts were equipped with time stamps before coding. Notably, while the transcript was German, the coding was done in English. This was to reduce the need for translation in the results section and conclusion, as well as to minimize room for errors or changing meanings through translation. During the first stage of thematic analysis, open coding, the data is to be turned into fragments through careful examination, comparison, conceptualization, and ultimately creation of categories that receive a descriptive label/code (Boeije, 2010, p. 96). As such, 695 initial open codes were produced. The next step of analysis was axial coding, which aims to connect codes from the first stage that relate to each other. However, axial coding also allows for changing codes or creating new ones, if parts of the data have not yet been sufficiently covered through the open coding process (Boeije, 2010, p. 108). Thereby, axial coding connected the open codes through comparison, contrasting and the identification of exceptional cases into 36 axial codes. These were e.g. labelled *Engaging to support/ affect visibility*, *Training the Algorithm*, *'Building' the own political echo chamber*, and *Double-checking or further researching content*. Finally, selective coding was conducted. In this stage, connections between the categories from axial coding are drawn, ultimately reassembling the data into overarching groups, that are central in meaning to the research and allow for the formulation of definite findings (Boeije, 2010, pp. 114, 116). The selective coding process led to three final codes: *Conscious Acts of Engagement*, *The 'Bubble'*, and *Trust or to Question*. The coding tree with all selective, axial, and open codes can be found in Appendix C.

### *3.1.7. Methodological Limitations*

An important methodological limitation to consider during the analysis and interpretation of results is the implicit danger of respondents' self-reports. Firstly, this relates to their application to participate: Although the inclusion criteria were carefully worked out and communicated to applicants, it has to be noted that the assessment of their suitability relied upon their self-presentation, which may have been manipulated by a personal desire to participate in the study, yet may have gone unnoticed. Secondly, while participants signed an informed consent form asking them to reply truthfully, the dependence on trust in their self-presentation is limiting. Here, a danger e.g. lies within participants' in-/ability to correctly "recall their exposure to media channels and content" (Möller et al., 2020b, p. 617). Further, research participants may present themselves differently in a research setting than in reality, or may memorize experiences inaccurately (Roulston and Choi, 2018, p. 243), which can distort the data. In other instances, respondents may also make "a priori assumptions" (Barbour, 2018, p. 220) about what the researcher may want to hear, thus, again, distorting the data.

Another methodological limitation relates to the reliability of results of qualitative analysis. Albeit its probed strengths for gaining in-depth insights and understanding phenomena from within, qualitative research is criticized for threats through the transformation of "complex social situations (or other materials such as images) into texts" (Flick, 2018, p. 6), e.g., when transcribing or translating interviews. Further, while qualitative research allows for close observation of specific aspects, such focus may overshadow other crucial aspects (Flick, 2018, p. 7). Although freedom and great flexibility are mainly considered strengths of qualitative research, Nowell et al. (2017) e.g. note that the flexibility may risk "inconsistency and a lack of coherence when developing themes" (p. 2). Therefore, scholars have repeatedly stressed the need for a straightforward approach and transparent application to avoid the demarcation of qualitative research as too 'laissez-faire' and unstructured (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 95).

Moreover, the chosen inductive approach to this research carries the danger of feeling deliberated from theory and epistemology. However, Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 84) advocate for refraining from such feeling, as data analysis is always conducted in the context of such and cannot be done in an epistemological or theoretical vacuum. Further, it has to be noted that while inductive analysis allows for new findings and creative research without clinging to pre-existing knowledge, scholarship, or assumptions, inductive results are not per se generalizable, but rather "hypothetical and fallible" (Kennedy and Thornberg, 2018, p. 51).

Lastly, the choice of thematic analysis poses a methodological limitation, as it does not allow for investigation of the choice of language and thus hinders examination of underlying meanings (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 97). Nevertheless, when clearly and transparently structured and carefully conducted, it is a practical, widely applied qualitative method that "works both to reflect reality and to unpick or unravel the surface of 'reality'" (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 81).

After all, these limitations are not new and certainly not unique to or hindering this study. However, they need to be recognized for the sake of credibility and future research that may build upon and extend this study's findings.

### **3.2. Ethical Considerations**

Interviewing people about their private SM usage with a specific relation to political content and thus implying political orientation, can involve sensitive personal information. In order to ensure the respondents' well-being and protect them from any harm related to the research at all times, during and after the data collection, the purpose and scope of the study, as well as possible risks and benefits, were made transparent to participants. Further, the interview recordings were stored locally and only accessed by the researcher. Additionally, transcripts were pseudonymized, to ensure anonymity of the participants. Moreover, respondents were explicitly allowed to end participation, request deletion of their data, or skip questions at any moment before, during, or after the interviews without reasoning.

Adding to the credibility of this study and to ensure sincerity in research (Tracy, 2010, p. 842), aspects of positionality should now be considered. Positionality refers to "a researcher's worldview and standpoint when conducting research" (Yip, 2024, p. 223), while reflexivity is the recognition thereof and thus relates to becoming aware of how researchers and participants influence each other reciprocally (Warin, 2011, p. 811, 812). As "no research is free of the researchers' values, biases, and assumptions" (Yip, 2024, p. 230), discovering and being attentive to personal identity and context in all research processes allows to gain distance and thereby make research less influenced, ultimately countering limitations of validity (Harding, 1993 in Warin, 2011, p. 810; Maxwell, 2018, p. 24; Yip, 2024, p. 223). A few ethical considerations that may have influenced this study should thus be highlighted in the following.

First of all, this work's author is a white, cis-female, 26-year-old German, with a political orientation to the left. As a master student of critical media studies and with a strong critical stance towards increased and unreflected digital and SM usage, the perceived urgency and societal relevance of this study, as well as the creation of the interview guide, analysis and interpretation of findings may be influenced by personal interests and understanding of contemporary political developments. This background may have further had an impact on the access to participants during interviews, who all indicated a political left-orientation. Although the researcher did not disclose her political standpoint to the participants and specifically emphasized that political opinion would stay unjudged and not be relevant to neither the interview nor the study, impacts of sympathizing with respondents' answers based on their political viewpoints and thereby affecting the interpersonal relation during the interview cannot be ruled out.

Further, the researcher's positionality as an insider or outsider plays a role. She can be considered an insider in terms of political orientation, as well as in terms of what it means to be a regular IG user and enrolled student. However, an outsider position can be identified by the age-range and possibly differing experiences and perceptions of political content on SM. Further, the interviewees may have been at a different stage of political socialization, simply due to their age-difference. While shared experiences that come with being an insider may have positive effects on the rapport, it may also lead



to the danger of participants assuming that the researcher understands statements without the need for further explanation or detail, which can cause blind spots (Warin, 2011, p. 811; Yip, 2024, p. 228).

Next, potential hierarchy or power relations during the interviews should be recognized. The researcher is only slightly older than the participants and shares the occupational status of being a student, which may create sympathy and can thus make respondents “more willing to share information” (Yip, 2024, p. 225). However, the interview still operated with roles of an interviewer who asks questions on the one side, and a respondent, whose task it was to answer, on the other. Simultaneously, the interviews were recorded, which may have also given a feeling of supervision and ‘watching-every-word’, thus possibly affecting the respondents’ willingness to respond openly. Therefore, participants were repeatedly reassured that no political stance or statement would be judged in any way, and that they were perceived as the experts of their own engagement experiences. This was to emphasize that honest answers would be the most valuable contribution to the research, and that there were no good or bad, right or wrong answers. Albeit informing the participants about all the latter circumstances and options through an informed consent form and a short introduction at the beginning of the interview, the recording and ‘interrogator-interrogated’ dynamic may have still impacted participants’ comfort to speak freely and elaborate in detail.

Lastly, it should be noted that the author of this study is still a novice in research, specifically to working directly with research participants. This may have firstly impacted the way that she was perceived by the respondents, possibly affecting their own feeling of security and trust in the research process. Secondly, the lack of profound experience with interviewing study participants and conducting thematic analysis may have limited the researcher’s abilities to ask follow-up questions at the right times, to successfully exploit the benefits of thematic analysis for findings, as well as to have the right focus while interpreting the results. Notably, this is not to downplay the findings of this study, but rather to foster an awareness for other scholars that may want to draw on or extend the findings.

## 4. Results and Discussion

The thematic analysis of the ten interviews helped to develop three key themes. These function as a basis to answer the subquestions relating to German young adults' engagement patterns, motivations, and implicit CML skills. In the following, the key themes will be presented in detail, interpreted, discussed and contextualized with the help of exemplary quotes from the interviews and existing literature. The first theme is *Conscious Acts of Engagement*, highlighting the CML informed motivations and patterns of participants' engagement or purposeful non-engagement with political content. Theme two addresses *The 'Bubble'*, noting the participants' awareness of and two-fold stance towards being in a 'bubble' of opinion-reinforcing political content. Finally, theme 3, *To Trust or to Question*, addresses how respondents made critical and informed decisions in evaluating trustworthiness of content, seeking additional sources and considering audience positionality.

Ultimately, this detailed results section allows for the formulation of final statements to the initial research question in the conclusion chapter, which was posed as follows: *How do German young adults draw on CML when engaging with political content on IG?* An overview of all open, axial and selective codes can be found in Appendix C.

### 4.1. Theme 1 - Conscious Acts of Engagement

This first theme is concerned with the most common engagement patterns that the participants of this study reported, as well as the motivations they indicated to apply them. As such, 'liking' posts, comments or stories, sharing content, as well as blocking or even reporting will be addressed. Then, the way in which participants engaged with comment sections, and finally their emotional engagement will be highlighted.

#### 4.1.1. 'Liking'

First of all, 'liking' content was considered an act of approval and a way of showing support for a certain statement, viewpoint, or creator. In that sense, the participants also rejected 'liking' content that opposes the own political opinion. E.g., Enno said "I only ['like'] stuff that appeals and fits to me" (44:09). Ava stated: "If I do not agree with something, I would not give a 'like'" (46:42). However, an exception in this were posts by official and public news agencies, such as the German broadcaster *Tagesschau*. Instead of presenting an opinion, such accounts were perceived as delivering news, so that Alina (47:15) said she would also 'like' their posts, even if generally the news did not appeal to her or she considered them *bad*. Her aim was to convey the message, that there was a public demand for their work: "I still think that it shows the Tagesschau that there is public interest and that they should keep posting such content" (47:15). This statement hints at a symbolic meaning of a 'like' that goes beyond mere 'approval': 'Likes' were considered as signifiers of relevance and legitimacy of a content or opinion. Mika e.g. noted a motivation to 'like' comments based on the assumption that "the number of 'likes' (...) very much shows how much support a certain opinion has. (...) I want for other people to see that my opinion has more support" (39:03). However, Simon (59:07) critically stated, that, precisely because of the indication of relevance or legitimacy through 'likes', it is also important to handle them attentively. He highlighted the need for

more differentiation: “I think there are many people, who simply ‘like’ everything they see. However, in particular with political content I find it important to be a bit more nuanced” (59:07). Such critical and political comprehension of a ‘like’ suggests CML in terms of awareness over the impact of ‘liking’-engagement, which was also addressed by other interviewees. Hence, a ‘like’ was not only considered as a sign of approval or relevance, but further seen as a political statement. A way to politically position oneself, in that it shows if one agrees with a certain standpoint or claim of a post. As IG indicates which other followers ‘liked’ a post, Simon (54:30) noted that he sometimes actively refrains from ‘liking’, so that other people would not mistake it for a statement of full approval of the content’s claim and thereby misinterpret his political opinion. Further, it was also stressed that ‘liking’ could be actively used to support a creator’s reach and increase the overall algorithmic support and visibility of a certain content, aligning with existing research on recommender systems and algorithmic audiencing (e.g. Riemer and Peter, 2021, p. 409). As such, Alina described views, follows and ‘likes’ as IG’s *currency*, which impacts “the algorithm and thus needs to be considered” (6:30). Aware of subliminally operating systems like algorithms and recommender systems on IG, as well as the impact of engagement on them, Anne further said: “When I like the content and consider it important to also be shown to others, I definitely give it a ‘like’” (33:50), assuming that engagement would lead to IG suggesting the same content to her followers. Beyond applying ‘likes’ for making content more visible to others, Kira also stated, that she sometimes ‘likes’ content strategically, with the intention to herself “be shown more content that relates to it” (51:12). This awareness of algorithms and aiming to practice influence on visibility, will be further addressed in *Theme 2: The ‘Bubble’*. Lastly, it should be noted, that while most participants expressed various implicit and critically informed motivations to ‘like’ content, such an approach cannot be generalized or presupposed. Although generally appearing critical and informed in the way she reflected on engagement with political content on IG, Marie e.g. said that she simply likes posts or comments that appeal to her, that she finds funny, or that represent something she thought as well. “There is no further thought process involved” (Marie, 32:34), she said. Nevertheless, as mentioned, the overall perception of ‘likes’ being laden with political meaning of approval left participants united in that they would not give a ‘like’ to content they did not agree with. Vice versa, they reported to actively refrain from ‘liking’, as in Simon’s case, to not be misunderstood in terms of their political opinion, or to not increase a view-opposing post’s like-count or engagement-rate, considering the impact of engagement on algorithms. Alina (40:33) said she would not see why she should spend clicks and attention on something, which she did not want to spread. As such, active disengagement with certain content on SM like IG does not necessarily imply lower “functional digital skills and/or negative dispositions towards the internet” (Polizzi, 2025, p. 3), but rather embodies a critical consciousness of the effects of engagement and non-engagement.

#### 4.1.2. *Sharing Posts*

Interestingly, the engagement of sharing posts followed a similarly conscious and informed approach. However, it was less favored and reportedly less often applied than ‘liking’, as it required the content to be of great personal interest, carry strong meaning, or be of high topicality that may

even require action. This subsection addresses the sharing of posts through reposting content in their own story, or sending it to others via private message on IG.

In terms of reposting something, Enno e.g. explained that the content “has to be of great importance (...), or I have to really like a video and argument, or it has to be important to mobilize others to e.g. sign a petition or go to a protest. Generally, however, this is very rarely the case (...)” (37:43). Anne complemented this, by saying: “[Reposting] really only happens very rarely and mostly when I think it's drastically important and the whole world needs to see it“ (37:17). Further, they would also only repost content they agreed with or that they considered relevant to be shared with friends to inform them and spread awareness, describing a sense of responsibility. Marie e.g. stated: “I repost mostly when something overlaps with my opinion and I want for my friends to also encounter the specific post” (31:59). Or as Anne stated even in relation to content that fostered negative emotional reactions like anger or arousal: “I find it very important to raise awareness and inspire others to read that post too” (29:18). However, besides the aim to inform or spread awareness about both view-approving and -opposing perspectives, Simon referred back to the impact of sharing on the algorithmic support of a content. Therefore, he said, he e.g. refrained from sharing content from people he dislikes, “because that would generate reach” (59:07), which he would not want to be responsible for. Ava (59:15) also expressed a fear of spreading fake news through reposts, if she was not informed enough about a topic, which is why she only rarely did so. Further, sharing content with friends through reposts or private messages on IG was reported to give a feeling of self-efficacy and to foster political exchange or discussion. Ava recalled that she sometimes reposts content to reach family members who might have a different political opinion and thus usually encounter differently oriented content on their timeline. “If they haven’t seen it through their algorithm, then they can at least encounter it through my story post”, Ava (52:02) said. Concluding, sharing content through reposting or private messages was thus discussed by the participants as a form of political participation through making a statement, fostering exchange with others, and contributing to more informed discussions and discourse. This observation aligns with existing research by Lalancette and Raynauld (2019, p. 918) and Lee et al. (2013, p. 687), who have stressed the crucial role of SM for political socialization and participation of young citizens.

#### *4.1.3. Blocking and Reporting*

Sometimes, participants reported, they blocked or even reported political content which they encountered on IG. This was the case, when they considered posts to be harmful to people or democratic values through e.g. displaying discriminatory content or spreading democracy-threatening ideologies. Notably, identifying such contents and acting accordingly is one of the key goals of CML, as elaborated in the theoretical framework. The blocking feature was used to ‘inform’ the algorithm, that such content should not be shown on the own timeline again: “I block content to train the algorithm, so that it doesn’t give me content from that page anymore, when I am sure that it really does not fit with me and I consider it ‘bad’” (Enno, 45:44). Reporting content, on the other hand, was specifically done to contribute to the overall content management on IG. Although aware of a recent change in IG’s content regulation policies, Marie said: “When I am given that Nazi-Camp

content, which is really shocking and shows anti-constitutional actions, I write very long statements when reporting. My motivation is for that content to be looked at and taken down.” (11:36). As such, blocking and reporting harmful content was informed by the CML skill to detect underlying ideologies and discrimination, critically challenge, and actively counter them through informed application of IG’s technological affordances.

#### *4.1.4. The Comment Section*

##### Refusing Participation

Besides ‘liking’, a similarly often reported form of engagement was turning to the comment section. Notably, not for commenting. For several reasons, nine participants said that they would not engage in writing comments themselves anymore. First of all, Mika had e.g. made a disappointing experience, as, after writing his opinion under a post, he soon came to the conclusion that his comment had no impact: “political discussions in IG comments lead to little or nothing” (40:08). Noting a lack of active exchange, he argued that this was “because people do not use IG to be convinced by anonymous accounts or strangers they have no relationship with. It is all just about giving your own opinion” (Mika, 40:08). The perceived lack of exchange and impact was also described by others, who implied that they did not see how commenting would positively contribute to a discourse. Even in relation to approving comments, Ava (49:30) reported rarely feeling that such would be needed, wondering why her support should matter. Secondly, the danger of exposing oneself and offering attack surface played a role in not wanting to comment. The participants described an overall critical and negative perception of comment sections, as they considered them hateful, aggressive, and not complying with rules of respectful communication. As Marie noted: “Rules of conversation and suchlike are quickly thrown overboard, while anyone can hide behind some account name and write whatever they want. Thereby, things can quickly take an unpleasant or even dangerous turn” (08:53). In this sense, Lara added: “There is not really a fact-based discussion and one gets much more unrestrained” (23:52), highlighting an awareness of and critical stance towards lacking factual support in comment discussions.

Thus, an overall perception of comment sections not fostering fruitful discourse became clear. Based on these two main reasons, the benefits of IG granting voice and agency were not used when the chance was given through writing comments. However, the active decision for non-engagement in comment discussions conversely highlights CML in a sense of detecting and rejecting non-critical, non-informed, yet emotionally laden and extreme discussions, as well as longing for productive discourse that allows for challenging ideologies and norms to ultimately advance democratic values.

##### Reading Comments

While not commenting themselves, most respondents reported frequently *reading* the comment sections. Firstly, this was done to better understand a post in cases of uncertainty about its meaning or context. Looking into the comments was motivated by the expectation that other users may have already had the same question, asking the community for clarification. As such, Kira (01:05:04) e.g. said that, when she struggles to make sense of a post, she turns to the comments to see what other

people think about it. ‘What other people think’ however not only related to explaining a post, but was also sought after for getting a better overview of different standpoints on a post. On the one hand, this was to inform oneself about diverse perspectives on a topic. Kira continued, that she looks at comments “to see what other people think” (01:05:04), while sometimes she even “[scrolls] far down, because further up are mostly comments of which IG thinks that they could appeal to [her]” (35:51). Besides a desire for more diverse input on a topic suggesting CML to create a critically informed opinion, this ‘scrolling down’ to find what IG considers less important to a user further underlines an awareness of implicit technological structures like algorithms, as well as their effects on content visibility. On the other hand, reading comments of opposing opinions and arguments was also referred to by Alina as a means for being prepared to encounter them in offline discussion. She said that she was interested in knowing other people’s stances on a topic to “not be surprised at the lunch table and drop [her] jaw” (54:59). Beyond, Marie (29:55) also indicated that she turns to the comment sections when she questions the truthfulness of a post, e.g. in relation to the authorship or means of production, such as in relation to AI: “I sometimes don’t even realize at a first glance that it is AI generated. Then I go to the comments and often they say ‘yes, this is AI generated’ (...) and then I’m just like ‘good I looked into the comments’, because otherwise I wouldn’t have noticed” (29:55). Lastly, similar to seeing view-reinforcing content on the own feed in general, going through the comment section offered a feeling of belonging, through finding comments from others that represented and supported the own viewpoint. Seeing that other people felt the same or stood up for the shared opinion created a sense of community, a feeling of not being the only one. As such, Simon e.g. said that it can be encouraging to “find like-minded people who somehow think in a similar way, and feel less alone with your thinking” (16:50). However, in reference to political radicalization through IG, Kira (23:56) also saw a danger in the community-aspect of the comment section, as it allows for many like-minded people to assemble and thereby facilitates the perception that, since they are “all in this together” (23:56), they are ultimately right with their opinion.

Overall, the engagement with comment sections in terms of reading thus highlights an interest in seeking community and critically informing and advancing the own political opinion through observing a discourse and how different people approach it. Showing such interest in different viewpoints represents a critical consciousness and willingness to enhance it.

#### *4.1.5. Emotional Engagement*

Finally, the emotional engagement should shortly be turned to, as all participants reported some form of affectivity through the political content they encountered on IG. Their emotional experiences were very similar: News and view-opposing content, including posts or comment sections, were vastly met with arousal, anger, sadness, frustration, pain and sometimes confusion over how other people could support a certain claim that opposed the own values or viewpoint. Ava (53:59) e.g. said that specifically the thought of many other people seeing and believing content which she considers problematic, is what emotionalizes her. This again highlights an awareness of underlying harmful ideologies and manipulative content, as well as an understanding of other people’s varying abilities to discover possibly dangerous or misleading content, which can be detected through CML.

On another note, Finn (23:00) indicated that negatively ‘triggering’ content very much affects him and therefore draws more of his attention than positive content, leading to an increased spread of the negative through the algorithms. Notably, Finn’s statement matches findings from Klinger and Svensson (2024, p. 38) and Riemer and Peter (2021, p. 410), who note that more aggressive and harming contents draw most engagement, which in turn the algorithms favor for the sake of generating economic gain through user-attention. However, Enno (48:50) also noted that, as specifically such negative content draws his attention, he is more willing to inform himself about it further, e.g. through searching for additional sources to read, or listening to a podcast. Yet, such critical additional engagement with negatively perceived content was not reported by all participants and specifically touches upon the criticism related to CML of shifting great responsibility onto users to question and fact-check content.

Positive emotions, on the other hand, were evoked through view-supporting and educational posts or comments. As Kira said: “It gives me hope when I see that someone shares my opinion and makes the effort to create a post and spread it to the world” (40:20). Specifically educational posts about political topics were perceived as empowering, through increasing knowledge, offering creative or new arguments for discussions and inspiration for how to foster political change in everyday life. Alina e.g. noted that through the engagement with and acquisition of knowledge through political content, she felt “reinforced to address topics” (45:35) in real life and more encouraged to make a statement. As such, applying CML in educating and informing themselves through political posts on IG allowed for not only factual, but also emotional empowerment of the participants that led to a feeling of agency.

## **4.2. Theme 2 - The ‘Bubble’**

This second theme addresses the participants’ awareness of what they called the ‘bubble’ when referring to underlying structures of IG and opinion-reinforcing content, and how it informed their engagement with political posts. After pointing at the meaning of said ‘bubble’, the participants’ perceptions of its benefits and dangers will be highlighted.

### *4.2.1. Filter Bubbles and Echo Chambers*

Without prior mentioning by the researcher, participants brought up the term ‘bubble’ and included it in their explanations of the types of content they encountered on their IG feeds and why they thought that was. Finn e.g. tried to make sense of the construction of feeds by thinking of “the algorithms, that maybe just put you into a bubble” (11:56). On a similar note, Anne (04:07) mentioned that she perceives IG’s algorithm as quite strong and that it makes her rather encounter content that directly reflects her own political opinion. Thus, it would be easy to assume that by ‘bubble’ participants meant what Eli Pariser (2011, pp. 1-304) termed ‘filter bubbles’, and has since been widely used in politics, news, and even public discourse. It is a concept that addresses platforms’ personalized curation of user feeds through algorithmic pre-selection of content, without room for interference by the users themselves (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016, p. 10). These algorithms detect “user preferences in an opaque and unobtrusive way and subsequently offer users

more of the same content” (Möller, 2021, p. 93). However, the interviewees did not solely refer to their ‘bubble’ in direct relation to algorithms. Instead, they also applied the term more broadly to generally describe their positioning in a certain online space of a community with similar viewpoints, and the repetitive exposure to content that would reinforce those. Mika e.g. noted he was “in quite a bubble, so that the input is very similar” (04:24), and Marie reflected being in her own bubble, which for she would “obviously lack some other perspectives” (48:02). This highlights their awareness of other opinions existing outside of what they encounter on their feed, underlining critical consciousness. Moving beyond algorithmic control, participants also mentioned their active role in ‘building’ their bubble, by e.g. purposely following or unfollowing people to see more or less of their content. As Ava said: “IG shows me a lot of content from those who I follow. Thus, it is rather a self-chosen bubble” (03:18). Simultaneously, Marie (14:37) stressed that she mostly sees content she purposely ‘built’ into her feed, emphasizing the perception of active influence on the underlying technological structures of IG. In this respect, ‘bubble’ was rather referred to as what is scholarly known as *echo chambers*, a concept coined by Cass R. Sunstein (2001, pp. 1-202). As opposed to filter bubbles, echo chambers are defined by a “selfselected personalisation [*sic*], where people actively choose which content they see” (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016, p. 10). Thus, through following an account, users receive more content which reflects their personal opinion. As elaborated, the participants were aware of such systems and the influence of their active un-/following engagement choices. Through pointing out and elaborating upon how they thought their consumption of political content on IG was guided by their ‘bubble’, the participants thus showed awareness of underlying and operating systems that affect the visibility and invisibility of content; A clear indication of purposeful, and informed engagement through CML. However, they were not only aware of being in a bubble, but also showed a split opinion towards it, which should be addressed in the following.

#### 4.2.2. A Two-Fold Relationship

*Somehow, it is obviously cool to get personalized content. But somehow, I also find it very frustrating, because I don't really see what is going on in the world. (Lara, 06:26)*

The participants had a split opinion regarding being in a ‘bubble’ and predominantly seeing content that reinforced their own views. On the one hand, they were vocal about their satisfaction with it. They enjoyed seeing content that was appealing to their own opinion and, as noted in relation to e.g. the reading of comment sections, saw benefits to empowerment through finding community, extending knowledge, and finding inspiration for new arguments. As Alina (29:51) emphasized, creating and being in one’s own bubble on IG allows to gain additional information on topics of personal interest. Mika (27:30) even said that he would not want to see conservative or right-leaning political content on his feed, because he did not consider it to be educational or advancing. Such preferences for rather consuming content that reflects the own perspective through personalization are not surprising, as Möller et al. (2020b, p. 627) indicate that people with political views that



represent the ends of a political spectrum prefer algorithmic content curation, thus including the left-oriented participants of this study. Further, the perception that content that appeals to the own viewpoint is more educational, goes along with the finding that “if media users select political information that is attractive to them, they will be better motivated to process the information they encounter” (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016, p. 8). Supporting this with a focus on engagement-rate, some respondents like Alina (01:03:29) said that they were more likely to interact with content they were interested in and already had knowledge of. Beyond becoming more knowledgeable and being surrounded by a like-minded community while being in a ‘bubble’, Kira (01:11:17) even stated that she was afraid of being manipulated into changing her political opinion and values, if she was to encounter more content from another political orientation on IG. While she fails to recognize that manipulation can of course occur at any level of the political spectrum, this statement shows awareness of media texts’ power to influence and persuade people for e.g. underlying political interests and ideologies. How participants approached such issues like manipulation or underlying intentions will be addressed by theme three.

Besides the positive perceptions of being in a ‘bubble’, however, the respondents also expressed a need for more diverse political content on IG, to reflect a broader range of perspectives that would be more reflective of the world, where not everyone agrees to their own views. This goes along with existing scholarly criticism, that argues that the issue with algorithmically controlled and personalized spaces lies in their reduction of diversity of consumable content (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016, p. 10), and thus the diversity of perspectives to inform a political opinion and participation. Ultimately, filter bubbles are e.g. therefore discussed as facilitators of polarization and fragmentation (Möller et al., 2020a, p. 960; Rhodes, 2022, p. 2). However, it has to be noted that measurable effects of filter bubbles and echo chambers on political participation and social divide are still subject to ongoing research (e.g. Bruns, 2019, p. 5; Möller, 2021, p. 96; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016).

In reference to manipulation through opinion-reinforcing and polarizing content, Ava (01:02:59), Enno (26:48), Finn (42:18; 46:50) and Marie (46:19) also reflected on the positionality of younger users in ‘bubbles’, who do not have a set political opinion yet, but still repetitively encounter and engage with political content on IG from a single perspective, possibly getting drawn into extreme ‘bubbles’ without knowing of the underlying technological structures and how to possibly influence them. Ava (33:36) even mentioned a fear that such algorithmic exposure could lead to extremism in young people, which would indeed resonate with the current developments of an increasingly criminal right-wing radicalization and organization of young citizens in Germany, as mentioned in reference to the German chief of the Federal Criminal Police Office in the introduction of this work. With a focus on basic democratic values, Anne (41:23) thus stated that she considers it important to see diverse content for understanding other people’s needs, in order to create a mutual will to accept different sides and find compromise. By mentioning the danger of ‘bubbles’ to specifically younger people in years of their political socialization, the respondents showed reflexivity of positionality, meaning that people have different backgrounds and abilities to navigate and inform their media consumption critically.

However, for increasing the diversity in their feeds, the participants reported little effort. The only permanent exception was Simon (22:28), who explained that he also followed accounts with which he sometimes disagreed, but whose analysis of topics he perceived as differentiated and thus of educational value. Other participants solely noted actively seeking view-opposing content during the latest federal elections in Germany. Kira (41:42) e.g. said that she had looked up the different parties' top candidates on IG. However, Simon (28:29) also indicated a limit to his interest in other opinions, which referred to people who disseminate disinformation or right-wing ideologies. Participants' overall awareness of disinformation and fake-news will be highlighted in theme three.

Lastly, it should be emphasized that the criticism and danger of 'bubbles' was mostly pointed towards opposing political opinions. Mika (12:56) was the only interviewee to acknowledge that he was probably also subject to radicalization through constantly being exposed to reinforcing left-oriented content on SM. After all, most interviewees thus failed to recognize, that, regardless of the political orientation, repeated exposure to "biased information that favours [*sic*] a particular political standpoint (...) close to [the] own will eventually develop more extreme positions and [make people less] tolerant with regard to opposite points of view" (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016, p. 8). The one-directional critical awareness of 'bubbles' in relation to opposing viewpoints thus hints at a possibility of the participants failing to critically approach and evaluate the political content they were shown on IG that supports their *own* opinion and ideologies. An important question that arises is thus: If CML is mostly applied towards view-opposing content and issues, can one even speak of CML? At the same time, the aim of CML to foster democracy has to be remembered, which, e.g. in the case of the German political left is clearly given, yet not present in the uprising German right-wing movement and leading party *AfD* (Alternative for Germany), which was only recently classified as secured extremist and unconstitutional. Thus, the question of CML should always be approached in consideration of political context and intent.

### **4.3. Theme 3 - To Trust or to Question**

This final theme describes how CML informed the participants' engagement with political content on IG with a focus on trustworthiness, identifying authorship, underlying agendas, representational choices, fake-news and manipulation.

#### *4.3.1. Authorship and Underlying Agendas*

All participants said that they used IG as one of their main platforms for encountering political content, including news, thereby supporting the statistics from the *Reuters Institute Digital News Report* (Newman, 2024, p. 14). They followed a vast range of politically oriented accounts on the platform, from public broadcasters to free journalists, NGO's and other politically engaged groups or organizations, as well as public figures and everyday-people, who created politically laden informational or educational content. As the topical foci mostly lied on news, feminist-, anti-patriarchal-, capitalism-critical-, or sustainability related pages, all respondents said they would educate and inform their political opinion through them. Therefore, it was crucial to understand how they evaluated the accounts' or posts' trustworthiness, and how that was guided by CML.

First of all, a general average trust in the content they encountered on their personalized timeline was reported, based on the idea that they were mostly shown content from people they found credible and therefore followed in the first place, or content from friends, whom they had trust in based on their personal relation. However, the trust was accompanied by critical thoughts too. While Lara noted to “have a strong fundamental trust in the people [she followed]” (30:54), she added that, specifically in regard to educational accounts, references to sources and scientific studies increased it. Yet, she simultaneously reflected on the fact that such sources could also be manipulated or unscientific. Simon (48:39) explained that he considered the work of accounts he followed trustworthy, specifically if he was familiar or even knew the people behind them personally. Yet, his trust was bound to knowing that they were not following an underlying agenda with their posts. This e.g. made him more critical towards content from activists, even if their aims appealed to him, because they sometimes “intentionally simplify topics” (48:39). In reference to trust based on personal relations, Mika (51:04) further stressed that knowing someone and fundamentally trusting them would not mean that their statements are automatically true. Instead, he added, he would need to inform himself further. Mika’s statement thus stands in line with a danger of trust in personal relations identified by Marquart et al. (2020, p. 203), who emphasize that direct trust in friends and followers can evoke unreflected diffusion of misinformation. Marie (25:12) therefore said that she prefers to inform herself about the background of an account or creator, to first get a ‘feeling’ for them.

Interestingly, accounts from official public broadcasters like the *Tagesschau* were initially met with general trust. “[They have] a reputation for posting rational journalism”, Mika (25:37) said, and Alina added: “I think public broadcasters are somewhat regulated, so that I can trust them. But I also know that they do not represent every conflict factually” (32:20). With this, Alina highlighted her critical consciousness and pointed at a concern that many others noted too: A decline in public broadcasters’ neutrality and increased impact of underlying political agendas, that negatively affected their trustworthiness. This was specifically noted in relation to the coverage of the ongoing genocide in Gaza by Israel. They recognized that their reports on IG catered to political decisions of the German government, leading to a lack of neutrality and factuality. Kira (45:20) e.g. said the *Tagesschau* was using formulations that made her question their reports and ultimately evaluate them as non-neutral. Marie further showed critical analytical skills, in noting that the *Tagesschau* was following “German political goals and agendas” (04:36), so that she had e.g. started actively following additional accounts to get more information from other perspectives on Gaza (02:39). On a more general account, Finn (26:59) said that he was trying to be considerate of broadcasters’ political orientation when engaging with their posts, so that his evaluation and interpretation of content could be reflective of e.g. more conservative or progressive approaches to a topic.

As such, in aiming to evaluate the trustworthiness of political content on IG, the respondents drew on CML to consider political agendas or intentions behind posts, as well as critically reflect on authorship — who was the creator, what do they stand for, and what are their sources?

#### 4.3.2. *Representational Choices, Fake-News and Manipulation*

Beyond approaching trustworthiness of political accounts and contents on IG based on authorship and underlying agendas, the respondents also reflected on representational choices, including language and aesthetics, that influenced their perception and evaluation of a post as reliable or rather questionable.

Generally, simplified, blatant content was regarded critically. As such, Anne e.g. said that she did not believe content when it was too enthusiastic, “simply over the top” (22:54), trying too hard to force an opinion on the viewer, thus identifying possible underlying motivations. Finn (32:15) further noted that rhetoric choices, as well as the video-cut, added music, and overall professional character played a role for his trust in a post, questioning e.g. when people used eye-catching formulations and wondering about the intention behind it. Moreover, he (26:59) added he would always try to question whether rhetorics e.g. aimed at dividing people, or creating an enemy stereotype. As such, CML guided them in detecting manipulative strategies to influence users’ appeal to a post and political opinion. Further, awareness of the short-lived, simplifying and often de-contextualizing character of political content on IG was mentioned. Stating that she sometimes missed more discourse around a topic in posts, Alina noted that reading five bullet points made people feel like it is enough to be informed, while, usually, reading a newspaper would take “20 minutes to understand what is going on” (36:57). Anne (59:53) therefore emphasized that she saw a danger in trusting short snippets on IG, because they never represented the whole story, which could make people support an opinion without knowing what further stood behind it. Simon (54:30), on the other hand, gave an example of a misleading and reality-distorting graphic by the German interior minister, who had posted a mis-scaled comparison of the numbers of left-wing- and right-wing motivated crimes, making left-wing crimes appear much more frequent than they statistically were. As such, the misrepresentation catered to a political opinion and agenda of the minister, as well as pre-supposed that the public would have enough literacy to nevertheless decode the statistic correctly. After all, spreading distorted pictures can turn into the popularization of fake news and thus manipulation of the public. Also mentioning AI, Marie (07:53) was clear, that IG offered great space for such.

Against this backdrop of CML informed awareness over manipulative posts and strategies, respondents were asked how they would engage with content they questioned or suspected. One common action was to investigate the IG account feed behind the content, to see what else they would share and stand for (e.g. Alina, 34:15; Enno, 28:11; Finn, 23:00). Kira (49:48), Mika (24:28) and Simon (48:39) added that they would also turn to search-engines to seek further articles on the topic. Still, Lara (20:15) said, she found it increasingly hard to detect facts and credible sources, specifically in consideration of increasing AI-generated content. This fear of not being able to detect fake news was emphasized by Kira (01:11:17), who mentioned that she was afraid of being manipulated by the smart and intentional formulations of most content herself, and that it made it hard for her to differentiate and identify truth. This expression of hardship aligns with recent data from the Reuter Digital News Report 2024 (Newman et al., 2024, p. 17), which shows that only around 50% of social platform users find it easy to detect untrustworthy information. Anne (18:11; 48:36) further extended this fear with a focus on positionality, saying that the rhetoric and aesthetic

choices were so thoughtful, that she worried many “could not differentiate” (18:11) and successfully evaluate political standpoints anymore, thus describing choice of language as an influence on the access of political content. As mentioned, Anne thereby showed awareness of people’s positionality and cultural capital and its impact on political participation. Relating to the question of how he would engage with content he suspected, Enno (28:11) added to reflexivity of positionality, showing awareness of his educational level of being a master student and how it made him confident about his skills to fact-check or further research content. On a similar note, Finn (11:56; 29:51), who was also a master student, recognized the same privileged personal situation of being able to reflect on content, and the possibility of it being different for others. This awareness of audience positionality ultimately allowed the respondents to understand why other people would have different opinions and opposing standpoints towards political issues. As Kira (17:27) said: Other people approach topics from different angles.

Finally, as has become clear through this third theme, the participants drew on CML to generally be aware of, recognize and critically question authorship, representational features of political content, their underlying intentions or agendas, as well as possible impacts on the formation of their own political opinion or that of others. Further, their CML skills were drawn on to fact-check suspicious content with additional sources in- and outside of IG, highlighting their critical stance and desire to not contribute to e.g. further spreading false information. Moreover, CML also helped them to reflect on their own and other people’s positionality, considering different abilities and cultural capital to critically and reflectively engage with political content on IG.

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to generate insights into how German young adults' draw on CML when engaging with political content on IG, in order to contribute to two identified scientific gaps: Firstly, the lack of qualitative research at the intersection of SM and political participation, and, secondly, the striking underutilization of CML as a concept and analytical lens for the field. Moreover, the study catered to the societal relevance of deeper insights on the topic, posed through an increasing impact of SM platforms on political socialization and participation processes of young citizens, as well as an increasingly criminal and radicalizing right-wing movement of young citizens in Germany. Data was collected through 10 semi-structured interviews that were analyzed through thematic analysis with open, axial and selective coding. The following sections summarize the main findings and provide concise answers to both the sub-questions and the overarching research question. Then, theoretical implications will be presented, followed by final notes on this study's credibility, limitations, and suggestions for future research avenues.

### 5.1 Summary of Findings

As has been extensively discussed throughout the foregone results chapter, the analysis of data led to three key themes related to the main research question: *Conscious Acts of Engagement*, *The 'Bubble'*, and *To Trust or to Question*. The key findings of these themes should now be summarized and combined to first answer the guiding sub-questions, and then give an ultimate answer to the main research question.

#### 5.1.1. Sub-Question 1

The first sub-question was: *What engagement patterns do German young adults exhibit in relation to political content on IG?* Throughout the interviews, it became clear that, besides watching and observing political content in the first place, the young adults mostly engaged in the form of 'liking' content, respectively posts, comments or other people's stories. However, they also reported purposeful *not*-'liking'. Another very prevalent form of engagement was posed by reading comments under posts. Simultaneously, the respondents again vocalized an active decision to *not* engage, by not writing comments themselves. Due to the consciousness behind the non-engagement, not 'liking' and not commenting were considered notable forms of engagement, and should not be mistaken as mere disengagement through e.g. disinterest. Further, participants reported sharing posts with friends and followers through either reposting other accounts' content in their own story, or sending it to others through the private message feature on IG. Notably, within private messages, they then also engaged in exchange and discussion about political contents. Additionally, the participants also mentioned sometimes blocking or reporting content they considered harmful. Lastly, they engaged with political content in emotional and cognitive ways, meaning experiencing positive or negative feelings towards political content on the one hand, and engaging in questioning and evaluating content and underlying influences on their perception of it, on the other.

The choice to engage with political content in each of these forms was guided by specific and CML-informed motivations, which is why the acts of engagement were considered *conscious*. The

underlying motivations and their guidance through CML will be addressed in the following part, answering sub-question two and three.

### 5.1.2. Sub-Question 2 and 3

The second sub-question of this study was: *What motivations underlie these engagement patterns?* Knowing about the different forms of engagement that the young adults applied, allowed to ask them about their motivations to do so. As their explanations of different motivations were vastly related to or informed by aspects of CML, sub-question two and three should be answered jointly. To remind, subquestion three was posed as follows: *In what ways do CML skills inform the engagement motivations and patterns?*

The participants of this study showed CML of various forms, and found a variety of ways to draw on it during engagement with political content on IG. Firstly, they reported awareness of underlying algorithmic structures, that governed the in-/visibility of content and personalization of their own and other people's IG feeds. Interestingly, they actively used this knowledge, to inform their motivations for engaging or not engaging with content. Thereby, 'likes' were e.g. given to not only show approval and make a political statement, but to actively influence the algorithm's perception of this content's relevance, which they knew was influenced by user engagement-rates. As such, they simultaneously actively refrained from engaging with contents they disagreed with or disapproved of, in order to not advance their perceived relevance and hence be responsible for algorithmic support and spread of it. Another form of engagement to influence the algorithmic support of content was seen in blocking and reporting harmful content, in order to avoid the spread of potentially dangerous, anti-democratic or also discriminatory messages, as well as fake news. Thereby, participants additionally showed awareness of ideologies, mis- and disinformation, as well as the ability to detect, challenge and actively counter those, which is a crucial part of CML in its aim for fostering democratic values.

While 'using' the algorithm to support or hinder content, the respondents further showed awareness of experiencing IG from within a 'bubble' of opinion-reinforcing content and community on IG. This was met with satisfaction for being able to e.g. gain more knowledge about certain topics and feeling empowered about their own political position, but simultaneously also raised concerns about lack of diversity regarding different political opinions and possibly resulting polarization or even radicalization. Notably, this fear was mostly reported with regard to people of another political opinion than their own. Further, while CML made them aware of what they self-termed the 'bubble', nine out of ten respondents failed to make use of their algorithmic knowledge to foster a more diverse timeline for themselves through e.g. following accounts with different standpoints.

Beyond the awareness of algorithmic structures and the personalization of their feeds, the participants also showed reflexivity of authorship and underlying agendas or intentions of content. This CML skill motivated them to actively seek more content from diverse perspectives on a certain topic, when they considered posts as biased or influenced by e.g. political agendas in a certain way. This further emphasizes the respondents' desire to be critically informed and their ability to circumvent structures that oppress or preclude information. However, it has to be noted again, that

the desire to find additional content to a topic or issue was always mentioned in relation to having seen too little content that appealed to one's own opinion.

Moreover, the respondents said they aimed to inform and inspire others through sharing content, to spread awareness of a topic and even mobilize, when political action was required. In this way, their motivations to engage with content drew on CML in the form of creating empowerment through using and encouraging voice and agency, ultimately fostering critical consciousness in others through self-expression. Thus, the participants noted that their desire to engage was also motivated by a feeling of political self-efficacy and political participation. Further, the desire for engaging with and possibly even acting upon content was often mentioned in relation to emotional reactions to posts. Interestingly, while emotional engagement was not necessarily evoked through a motivation but rather through exposure, it conversely fostered motivation to act. As such, emotional engagement led to participants wanting to further inform themselves, counter content with ideologies or opinions that rose e.g. negative emotions, and thus overall turn feelings of anger, arousal, or even happiness and empowerment into acts of resistance or support. In short, CML guided the respondents in turning emotional engagement into critical action.

Lastly, CML allowed the respondents to evaluate the trustworthiness of political content along the lines of representational features and authorship, such as usage of blatant and eye-catching language or otherwise manipulative aesthetic choices to advance underlying agendas. They also identified issues of simplification and decontextualization of topics through the short formats of IG posts. While this did not motivate them to research every content they saw for gaining a more extensive understanding, they at least were aware of the limiting character of the content they encountered and reflected on this when including new information from IG into their own opinion. When suspecting content to be untrue or misleading, they further drew on CML to search for additional sources to fact-check content and make more informed decisions about what to believe and what not to. Notably, specifically in relation to evaluating trustworthiness of content and identifying manipulation or fake-news, the participants expressed a reflexivity of audience positionality. They noted that people have different socio-cultural and economic backgrounds and may therefore decode media texts and opinions differently. A specific fear in this relation was indicated by many participants regarding younger adults, who were still in the midst of political socialization and forming a political opinion. They worried these younger people could easily be drawn into extreme political corners of SM without noticing, because of their positionality, lacking CML, and scarce exposure to other positions.

While all these findings support a great positive impact and guidance of CML in the young adults' engagement patterns and motivations with political content on IG, it has to be noted, that most criticisms and desires to detect e.g. manipulation or underlying agendas were pointed towards opposing viewpoints. While it has to be considered that all interviewees were politically left-oriented and supportive of democratic values, overtly criticizing the 'other side' that does not appeal to the own opinion raises the question of how successfully or exhaustively CML is really drawn on.



### 5.1.3. Answering the Main Research Question

The young adults' decisions and motivations to engage or actively not engage with political content on their IG feeds were led by conscious and CML informed motivations. They showed awareness of the impact of their engagement choices on underlying systems and thereby aimed to actively contribute to the visibility or invisibility of content, as well as, in some instances, actively sought new accounts or further input in e.g. comment sections to develop their own opinions and critical consciousness. Notably, however, their engagement was mostly done in favor of their own political stance. Asking how German young adults draw on CML when engaging with political content on IG thus has to be answered with two main statements: First, the German young adults' engagement patterns and motivations were highly informed by CML and led to an informed and critical approach of and interaction with political content the platform. However, albeit this overall successful application of CML, a blind spot remains through selectively drawing on these skills to mostly critically approach content that does not appeal to the own political opinion.

## 5.2. Theoretical Implications

In terms of theoretical implications, the findings of this study both substantiate pre-existing scholarship, as well as challenge a few assumptions about engagement with political content on SM and the role of CML within.

Firstly, the findings generally align with existing works concerned with CML in relation to its applicabilities, as the respondents used it for fostering a critical consciousness, informing themselves, understanding, critically reflecting upon and engaging with content, underlying ideologies, agendas and structures online. Yet, this study has highlighted a selective application of CML in favor of the own and against other viewpoints or opinion-opposing contents, that challenges the scholarly assumption of CML naturally fostering a balanced approach to media texts. This adds a valuable point of criticism to the concept and calls for recognition in future works that approach CML definitions. Further, the findings cater to the scholarly recognized danger of filter bubbles, polarization and radicalization (e.g. Kahne et al., 2012, p. 4; Riemer and Peter, 2021, p. 417). However, the results emphasize the strong relevance of algorithmic structures in SM engagement patterns and motivations, which confronts the scholarly debate around filter bubbles and echo chambers, which so far has rather questioned the effects and existence of such systems, or has merely recognized them in relation to extreme political opinions (e.g. Bruns, 2019, p. 5; Möller, 2021, p. 96; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2016, p. 10). In this sense, this work suggests a need for greater scholarly recognition of the fast changing and increasing role of SM platforms in political participation, and thus asks for scholarly updating the assessment of algorithmic influence on SM and political participation in current times. Another important theoretical implication can be identified by considering the participants' engagement in actively 'designing' or at least *aiming* to influence the design of their IG content for more political posts. This desire of including political content challenges the perception of 'incidental' encounter of political content on SM, that was noted by Möller et al. (2020b, p. 619) and thus asks for a more suitable terminology, that better connects

the ‘incidental’ character with the purposeful choice to increasingly and deliberately include political content in the own SM experience.

### **5.3. Credibility**

Credible research requires “careful scholarship, commitment to rigorous argument, [and] attending to the links between claims and evidence” (Seale 2004, pp. 409-410, in Silverman 2011, p. 359). The study at hand provides great methodological and theoretical transparency, which enables replication and thereby increases reliability (Silverman, 2011, p. 360). Nevertheless, it has to be noted that the replicability of the study is yet limited, as findings depend on the interpretation and positionality of the researcher and participants. The validity of this study, on the other hand, refers to the *trustworthiness* of its findings. As Hammersley (1990, p. 57, in Silverman, 2011, p. 367) puts it: It describes “[...] the extent to which an account accurately represents the social phenomena to which it refers”. Validity of this work is given by the provision of detailed transcripts and an extensive coding tree, allowing other researchers to go back to the dataset and understand where and how conclusions were drawn.

### **5.4. Limitations and Future Research**

First of all, a clear limitation of this study is posed by its sampling procedure. While acquiring participants through IG facilitated access to the field, it posed hurdles relating to the diversity of participants, specifically in terms of their political orientation. Notably, the author’s personal IG account that was used for publishing the search for study participants carries a publicly stated left- and feminist political orientation and thereby likely influenced the availability of politically diverse study applicants. As such, insights on how differently opinionated young adults draw on CML in their engagement with political content on IG requires further research. Such research would prove specifically crucial to better cater to the societal relevance related to the mentioned increasing extreme right-wing shift in young citizens in Germany. Further, as all participants indicated a high level of education through being either bachelor or master students, the findings of this study lack insights in regard to young adults with different cultural capital, which should be addressed by future studies as well. Another limitation of this study and thereby call for future research relates to the issue of data collection through self-reports. While valuable insights were gathered, the question of truthfulness and actual application of CML in lived IG engagement remains. Whether respondents also ‘walk their talk’, should therefore further be investigated through additional research that e.g. applies visual methods or walk-alongs. Next, the findings of the interviews imply that non-engagement can be an active, conscious and purposeful form of engagement, which however has received little scholarly attention (e.g. Polizzi, 2025, p. 15). Thus, future research with a focus on non-engagement and CML could foster a more nuanced and detailed understanding of how ‘active passivity’ can be politically meaningful, and how, overall, non-/engagement patterns foster political participation in digital spheres. Lastly, it should not be overseen that CML is relevant to all age groups and that CML research and educational programs have mostly focussed on younger generations, just like this thesis. However, as people from older generations are similarly turning into

regular users of the internet and SM platforms, the need to include them in future CML research and education related to SM and political participation should be noted.

Finally, the results of this study can be regarded as reminders of the relevance and urgency to engage further, deeper, and more critically with what surrounds and shapes not only young adults, but society all around: SM platforms, with all their benefits and disadvantages, specifically when it comes to political socialization and participation.

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## Appendix A - Anonymized Overview of Research Participants

Table A1

	Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Education Level	Occupation	Residence place	Nationality
1	Simon	23	m	Bachelor of Arts	student	Cologne	German
2	Lara	23	f	German High School Diploma	student	Regensburg	German
3	Alina	24	f	Trained anesthesia assistant	student	Berlin	German
4	Kira	21	f	German High School Diploma	student	Hamburg / La Réunion	German
5	Mika	22	m	Bachelor of Science	student	Berlin	German
6	Finn	24	m	Bachelor of Science	student	Rotterdam	German
7	Anne	24	f	Bachelor of Science	student	Innsbruck	German
8	Marie	23	f	German High School Diploma	student	Lüneburg	German
9	Ava	24	f	Bachelor of Arts	student	Malmö	German
10	Enno	23	m	Bachelor of Arts	student	Malmö	German

## **Appendix B - Interview Guide**

### **Intro - Conversational Start:**

1. Hey, how are you doing today?
2. Thank you for taking the time! I sent you an information letter about our interview a week ago, when you agreed to participate in this research and started taking screenshots and notes about your engagement with political content on Instagram (IG). However, I want to remind you about some aspects.

First, we are here today because I am researching how young adults in Germany engage with political content on social media, and what role critical media literacy (CML) might play in it. I have a few questions prepared, and we have around 45 to 75 minutes to talk. While I generally aim at covering all these questions, I want to encourage you to reply not only to the questions, but also to feel free to expand on them and add whatever comes to your mind. There are no right or wrong answers, and I also do not judge anything you say. I just want to mention this, since we will talk about political content, and political orientation is obviously closely connected to this, yet something very personal, that can also be quite a heated topic these days. But, please, I want to assure you that your political opinion really does not matter and will not be judged. This whole interview is only about how you encounter political content on social media and how you engage with it. So, the best thing you can do is just give me really honest answers. Please try not to think about what I personally think. That plays no role. I am here today, to understand your experience and your way to go about social media. I am just here to listen and ask more and more questions.

Further, I want to highlight again that you can end the interview at any point in time, or can also refuse to answer questions and ask me to skip to the next one, if you don't feel comfortable talking about certain things.

Then, you already signed the informed consent form, which asked for your permission to record this interview. I will save the recording to transcribe our conversation for my analysis process, but no one else will ever get to hear our conversation. Also, I will anonymize our talk, so that in my research paper you will not be mentioned with your real name, but I will give you a pseudonym, so that no one can draw any statements back to you. So, I want to ask you again, if you still agree to the recording of this interview? Now, lastly, I want to give you a short overview of the topics we will cover. We will start with some more general questions about your experience with social media, and then we will get to the main part that relates to your experiences, perceptions, and customs of

engaging with political content on IG. For the last 15 minutes, we will look at the screenshots you took and already sent to me via email. I am very excited for what you have to say to them and what I can learn from you.

Alright: So, remember, you are the expert here today and I am trying to learn from you. So, whenever something comes to your mind that you want to contribute, feel free to simply say it. There is no right or wrong.

Do you have any questions before we start, or is there anything you would like to know?

If not, then I would start recording now.

## **1. Demographics**

- Age
- Identified Gender (female [f], male [m], divers [d])
- Highest level of education
- Nationality
- Place of residence
- Occupation

## **2. General experience**

### Social Media

- Generally:
  - Since when do you use social media?
  - What social media do you use?
  - How often do you use social media per week?
  - What are your motivations to use social media?
- IG:
  - How often do you use IG per week?
  - What do you like or dislike specifically about IG?
    - How does it compare to other platforms?
  - Who do you follow on IG?
    - Friends, family, influencers, political personas, entertainers, ...

### Political/ Civic Participation

- What does 'political' mean in your perception?
- In how far would you describe yourself as a political or politically active or interested person?
  - How would you describe your political participation? (During elections, going to protests, sharing political views online)
- What kind of politics interest you and why?

### CML

- What is your opinion about SM platforms in general or specifically about IG?
  - Do you see any specific dangers or benefits? Which ones and why?
- Why do you think you encounter the content that you see on IG?

## **3. Political content, Engagement, and IG**

### **3.1 Political Content on IG:**

Definition: By political content I mean all sort of content that has to do with governmental politics and news, as well as content that addresses socio-political topics, something that is of societal relevance and yet has political significance. That can e.g. be climate change, feminism, racism, migration, etc.. But also political satirical posts, that e.g. criticize politicians. Do you have any questions about that?

### Content type:

- What type of political content do you encounter most on your IG?
- What do you like or dislike about the way that content is presented?  
(e.g. the format [video, photo, text], the choice of word [professional, jargon], the representational choices [intensity of images, neutrality,...])
- *Optional if time:* In how far do you perceive political content as emotionally laden?  
(e.g. hateful, happy, positive/negative, intense, traumatizing, relieving)
  - Can you give me an example?

### Type of Encounter:

- When you encounter political content on IG, how does it happen?
  - Through people you follow, recommendations from IG, etc.?
  - Active search for content or does it simply appear in your feed?

### Stance towards political content:

- How do you feel about encountering political content on SM?(e.g. Do you like that it is present there, or would you e.g. prefer SM platforms to be less political and more focused on entertainment?)
- Do you have any concerns about political content being on IG?
  - e.g. issues of representation, algorithms, AI, misinformation, polarization, filter bubbles,...
- Reliability of political content:
  - In how far do you trust or distrust the political content you see on IG?
  - By what means do you evaluate political content on IG?
    - *Optional follow-up:* What do you do, when you see something, that you do not believe or at least question? (do you cross-check sources?)
  - Does it matter to you who produced the content and why?  
(e.g. a news outlet, influencer, or activist group)
- *Optional if time:* Is there political content you wished you encountered more or less often on IG?

### **3.2 Engagement with political content on IG:**

Definition: By engagement with content on social media I mean anything you do or do not do, when you encounter political content. E.g., do you look at something, or do you swipe rather quickly, do you read posts fully, or do you look at captions and then go on, do you like, share, comment on content, do you maybe even create political content yourself? So, when we talk about engagement with political content on IG, all of such actions are what I mean. Again, there are no right or wrong answers or engagements, so whatever you remember that you do, feel invited to share it with me. I hope the manifoldness of engagement forms has become clear. Do you have any questions?

### Type of Engagement:

- How would you generally describe your own SM activity?  
(e.g. passive, interactive, creating, affective)
- What is your most used type of engagement?  
(e.g. reading, skipping, commenting, liking, sending to friends, sharing in story, taking part in comment section discussions)

- How do you feel when you engage with political content?  
(e.g. sad about the world, happy about progress, ...)
- In how far does your engagement vary when you encounter political content that matches your own opinion, versus when it goes against it?

#### Motivations for Engagement:

- Why do you engage or not engage with political content?  
(e.g. boosting visibility of a topic, showing agreement, fostering discussion, ...)
- Have you ever created or shared political content yourself? If yes, what motivated you? If no, what held you back? (e.g. empowerment, gaining voice // feeling exposed, not knowledgeable enough)
- In how far does the emotional orientation of political content influence the way you engage with it? (e.g. if something is positively or negatively laden -> how does that affect your engagement?)

#### Requirements for engagement:

- Do you remember a political post you saw, that made you really want to engage with?
  - Why was that? And how did you engage with it?
- How does your engagement with political content differ or equal between topics you know a lot or little to nothing about?

#### Impact of engagement:

- In how far do you share or discuss political content offline, if you engaged with it online before?
- How does your engagement with political topics differ on IG, compared to offline?
- In how far does engagement with political content online impact your engagement with political topics offline?
- *Optional if time:* What do you think engagement with political content on IG contributes to society and politics at large?

### **4. Closing section**

- Is there anything else you would like to add about your social media use or engagement with political content on IG? Anything I haven't asked you about, or something you want to emphasize again, that you find specifically important?



**Outro:**

Thank you so much for participating in this study. If you have any further questions about the research, feel free to reach out to me. If anything else comes to your mind later or in the next days that you think is important but we did not talk about, feel free to message or call me. All information is great!

So, from now on, I will transcribe our talk, anonymize it, and start with the analysis. If you are interested in the results of my work, I can share them with you.

## Appendix C - Coding Tree

Selective Codes	Axial Codes	Open Codes	Frequency
Conscious Acts of Engagement			695
	'Liking'		
		'Like' if it is entertaining	2
		'Liking' as sign of relief/thankfulness	1
		'Liking' comments for resistance / to counter other comments	1
		'Liking' for approval and support	15
		Actively 'liking'	7
	Comment section / discussions is not fruitful		
		Discussion on IG affords less rhetoric skills	1
		Discussions are not fact-based	4
		Feeling uncomfortable in comment sections that oppose the own viewpoint	1
		Fruitfulness of IG discussions is questionable	3
		Rules of respectful interaction do not appear to apply	6
	Community and community engagement		
		Community affects own engagement patterns and intensity	5
		Community gives feeling of belonging	7
		Community reinforces viewpoint	4
		Critical thinking is enhanced through friends	1
		Encountering and engaging with content from followed accounts	10
		Finding community on IG is specifically relevant for minorities	1
		IG fosters community and networking options	5
		SM should be more for connecting friends and less political	1
	Emotional engagement		
		Feeling hopeful / empowered / encouraged	14
		Getting likes on a repost is a good feeling	1
		Happy about 'good'/'helpful' content	3
		Political content in memes can be funny and smart	1
		Positive content creates less emotional response	1
		View-opposing content makes emotional bc many others see it	1
		Informational posts do not really trigger emotional response	1
		Anger/ annoyance /arousal / confusion/ disbelief /frustration / sadness	11
		Negative /view-opposing content fosters deeper (emotional) engagement	6
		Negative emotional load is draining	2
		Political content emotionally affects	4
	Empowerment through educational content		1
		Increasing knowledge about own viewpoint is empowering	5
		New arguments are empowering	4
	Engaging to support / affect visibility		
		'Like'-Count indicates relevance or quality	1
		Engaging to support visibility	5
	IG content transfers into & fosters offline exchange		
		Active exchange about political content offline with other friends	8
		More willing to be political offline through political education online	4
	Lacking feeling of contribution/impact/expertise		
		Afraid of saying something wrong / spreading misinformation	2
		Comment would not add value	5
		Creating/Commenting lacks fruitful impact	9
		Currently in political stage of informing himself	1
		Lacking expertise to participate/contribute	8
		Lacking feeling of relevance to followers	2
		Not commenting if similar one already exists	3
	Motivations for commenting, if ever		
		Commenting as emotional response	2

Commenting only when it feels highly important	1
Commenting to intervene and resist	1
Commenting to show opinion	1
Desire to comment under view-opposing posts	2
Replying to defend oneself	1
Seeing view-opposing comments can influence opinion	1
Seldomly writing comments	1
Not 'liking' to avoid positioning or support	
Avoiding to 'like' to not be mistaken for approval	1
No 'liking' if not agreeing with content	1
Not 'liking' to not show approval	3
Used to not 'like' because it gives information about her	1
Not commenting	
Commenting evokes stress	6
Commenting is an effort	3
No comment writing	7
No relevance in writing approving comment	3
Not commenting under posts outside the own entertainment bubble	1
Not feeling eligible to comment	2
Not self-creating	
Feeling that posting/sharing political content can be annoying to others	1
No seeking information to then create a post	1
Not creating posts	3
Posting political content is exciting bc of reactions	1
Rather passive IG user	4
Spending time on engaging is not worth it since it is not reality	1
Was ridiculed for posting political content and then stopped posting	1
Political mobilization	
Finding petitions or protests through IG content	3
Mobilize and inform during elections	3
Reading comments	
Expecting certain comments	4
Reading comments for other viewpoints	6
Reading comments for uncertainty if something is AI	1
Reading comments to better understand post	3
Reading comments when questioning content	1
Reporting and blocking	
Aware of possibility to block or report	2
Blocking and reporting dangerous or harmful content	6
Reporting content that uses rhetoric means with dangerous intentions	1
Reporting content to hinder spread of false or dangerous information	1
Reposting content	
Observing people share a lot as reposts in story	1
Rather reposting topics that a majority would agree with	1
Reposting Engagement	5
Reposting requires great importance of content	2
Reposting to make political statement / position oneself	4
Seldomly share bc others find content anyway	1
Sharing political content in story is tricky / delicate	4
Sharing in private messages	
Sharing content for self-efficacy	2
Sharing content when moved by it	1
Sharing in for exchange/discussion	10
Sharing to spread awareness and inform others	7
Sharing view approving and opposing content in DMs	2

	Sharing with friends to gain approval or share disappointment	1
Training the algorithm		
	Engaging to increase visibility and reach	11
	Extreme images draw attention and capture attention for longer	1
	Purposeful non-engagement to not boost visibility	5
	Strategic engagement to influence the algorithm for own timeline	9
User Anonymity		
	Anonymity as being 'untouchable' on SM	7
	Anonymity of users leads to irrational statements	3
	Battling the anonymity	1
	No interest in engaging with anonymous strangers	2
The 'Bubble'		
	Awareness of underlying structures	
	Aware of 'bubbles'	17
	Awareness of purpose / intentions behind algorithms	1
	Disfavoring extreme bubble-effect	4
	Engagement (counts) indicate relevance	6
	Engagement affects recommender system	2
	Filter bubbles are a problem for the other side	7
	IG knows what users like	4
	Political contents through friends who post	2
	Radicalization through repeated encounter of onesided content	2
	Repetitive exposure reassures own opinion	7
	Controlled visibility and limited diversity	
	'Bubble' makes everyone believe in their own facts	1
	Algorithms foster polarization, extremism and radicalization	6
	Deliberate algorithmic invisibility and shadow banning	7
	Need for more diverse content without extremism	2
	View-opposing content is filtered out / hard to find	5
	'Building' the own political echo chamber	
	Actively seeking a political feed	7
	Automatic encounter of political content through following accounts	6
	Creating a bubble of appealing content	1
	Creating a bubble through following	5
	Feeling of control over own bubble / timeline	9
	Interest in other viewpoints	
	Actively seeking other viewpoints	3
	Different perspectives are important and interesting	9
	Engaging with view-opposing content	3
	Personalized content approving political opinion is dangerous	3
	View-opposing content to understand discourse	3
	Granting Voice and Agency	
	Access of right-wing parties to huge audience	1
	Appreciating accessibility of political content	1
	Everyone can create an audience	1
	Everyone can share - no limits or restrictions	3
	Giving voice to people who are not heard	3
	Spreading fake-news through easy accessibility	1
	Content in practice: favoring the own viewpoint	
	Comfort of 'bubble' makes happy	3
	Confused/ shocked when oppositional content shows	3
	Disliking view-opposing content on own timeline	3
	Encountering and engaging with contents of interest and own opinion	10
	Happy about reinforcement of own 'right' political opinion	1
	Hardly see view-opposing content	3

	Little interest in engaging with view-opposing content	6
	Personalization of content is two-fold	2
	Too many viewpoints are confusing	2
	View-opposing non-left content is dangerous	2
	Danger for young users in political socialization / Audience Positionality	
	Age regulation needed	1
	Opinions are fragile during political socialization	6
	Young people lack CML	1
	Extreme content on IG	
	Dilemma of wanting freedom of speech vs. seeing a danger in certain	2
	Disliking heavily opinionated, extreme, polemic content	1
	Extreme content gains attention	2
	SM offers extreme content and opinions	2
To Trust or to Question		
	Distrust in neutrality of public broadcasters	
	Awareness of underlying agenda (affects trust)	8
	Critical bc it does not represent own political opinion	1
	Seeking additional material for additional report (from own perspective)	4
	Double-checking or further researching content	
	Checking background of an account/post for trusting	5
	Double-checking before applying argument for own opinion	2
	Double-checking extreme/ simplified/ view-opposing content	3
	Double-checking with sources outside of Instagram	5
	No double-checking	2
	General trust in IG content and accounts	
	Average trust in pages	4
	Evaluate trust by tone of content / appearance of knowledgability	4
	Follower number as indication of legitimacy	1
	Preference to trust instead of searching - lazyness	1
	Rather trust people that share own political opinion	2
	Trust if source is visible (+)	7
	Trust in familiar people / friends	8
	Trust in feed can be misleading	3
	Trust in journalists and public broadcasters (+)	8
	Trust in source varies between pages	4
	Trustworthy if several accounts post the same	1
	Identifying representational strategies	
	Aware of representational features (language, image, sound)	7
	Choice of language affect accessibility of content	1
	Questioning image-making practices when an oppositional image appears	1
	Representational choices as biased and manipulative	14
	Inspiration for political participation	
	Gaining new insights and information for own opinion through IG	1
	IG content as source of inspiration	2
	Political content delivers new arguments	5
	Positionality and Responsibility	
	Reflecting on different positionalities/ backgrounds	19
	Self-responsibility to engage carefully	5
	Recognizing underlying agendas, ideologies, power structures	
	Aware of big tech company interests behind IG	5
	Aware that IG platform and posts follow an agenda	7
	Impact of political agenda/ governments on IG	6
	Not interested in viewpoints that spread right-oriented ideology	1
	Tech companies / private hands control visibility and users	4
	Simplification and decontextualization	

Content does not stick with one	3
Dangerous simplification of topics	3
Important to contextualize	2
Short content lacks discourse (decontextualization	3
Spread of fake news	
Accidentally spreading false information	1
Danger and spread of fake news	5
Easier to produce fake news than well researched content	1
Hard to identify fake news	3
Propaganda through fake news and misleading information	1
Trust in content can lead to fake news	1

## Appendix D - Participant Recruitment Post

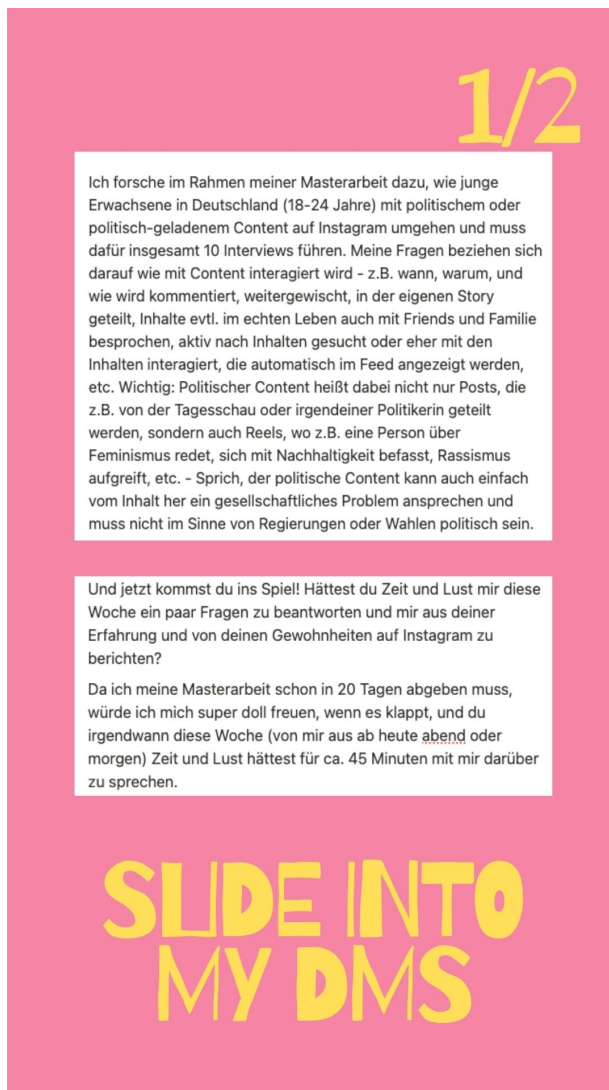


Fig. 1



Fig. 2