

“Vote for Me, I Am Authentic”: Performed Political Authenticity on Social Media

Simon M. Luebke ¹  and Ines Engelmann ² 

¹ Institute of Communication and Media Studies, Leipzig University, Germany

² Institute of Communication Science, Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany

Correspondence: Simon M. Luebke (simon.luebke@uni-leipzig.de)

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Abstract

Authenticity has become a key concept in political communication, particularly during election campaigns, which offer opportunities for politicians to strategically convey an authentic image. Studies show that voters increasingly value politicians who appear authentic, a factor influencing their voting behavior. In particular, social media provides an ideal environment for politicians to perform authenticity during campaigns by allowing them to bypass traditional gatekeepers and present themselves in an unfiltered and intimate way. Previous studies have begun to analyze how politicians perform authenticity on social media. However, few have examined and compared how often and in what ways different politicians present themselves as authentic on social media during election campaigns. Drawing on scholarship on political authenticity and gendered self-presentation, this study examines how politicians construct authenticity through textual and visual elements across social media platforms. We conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of social media posts ($N = 855$) on Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter by the three German lead candidates running for chancellor during the 2021 federal election. Our findings show that authenticity and its facets were an integral part of all candidates' social media presence and their election campaign communication. Furthermore, we found differences in how the one female and the two male politicians in our sample perform authenticity.

Keywords

authenticity; elections; gender; politicians; self-presentation; social media

1. Introduction

The authenticity of politicians is an important factor in their daily political communication, especially during election campaigns (Luebke, 2021; Sorensen & Krämer, 2024). Scholarly literature suggests that authenticity has become a more important political trait in the 21st century, possibly due to a greater focus on individual candidates in campaigns and news coverage (Balmas et al., 2014), as well as changing public expectations of what constitutes a “good politician” (Clarke et al., 2018). Accordingly, many citizens no longer seek only charismatic politicians with outstanding qualities but also want politicians who (also) appear approachable and ordinary (Valgarðsson et al., 2021, 2024). These latter qualities are often linked to political authenticity, which scholars have identified as a crucial factor in the public evaluation of political candidates and in voters’ decisions (Breitenstein et al., 2025; Luebke & Steffan, 2025b; Stiers et al., 2021).

Communication scholars describe social media platforms as an ideal environment for politicians to present themselves as authentic candidates (Kreiss et al., 2018; Luebke & Engemann, 2022; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). They offer politicians a new arena for impression management and provide an “expressive apparatus” (Shane, 2018, p. 3) to construct an authentic image. Yet they also function as digital environments where false and AI-generated content, including deepfakes, spreads widely. This feature heightens the relevance of questions of realness and authenticity in digital political discourse (Vaccari & Chadwick, 2020).

Scholars have begun to analyze politicians’ strategic efforts to perform authenticity on social media. These pioneering studies explore how authenticity is conveyed through visual and textual communication (Enli, 2015; Holtz-Bacha, 2025), formal cues (Shane, 2018; Sonnevend & Steiert, 2022), or the performance of a populist outsider (Enli, 2025; Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022). However, these approaches offer limited insight into how prevalent such performances are on social media. The few studies that address the salience of performed authenticity in election campaigns have focused on political content outside of social media (Sposito, 2025).

Furthermore, empirical research into politicians’ performed authenticity rarely adopts comparative approaches, so little is known about how such performances differ. For example, politicians’ gender is a particularly relevant factor that deserves greater attention as audience research found that citizens often judge authenticity based on idealized notions of womanhood and manhood (Parry-Giles, 2014). It is therefore plausible that male and female politicians perform authenticity differently to meet these gendered expectations (Luebke & Steffan, 2025a).

The present study aims to address these research gaps by analyzing how frequently and in what ways German politicians perform authenticity on social media during an election campaign. Theoretically, we conceptualize political authenticity as a form of self-presentation through which politicians aim to create impressions that they are and will remain true to themselves (Luebke, 2021; Parry-Giles, 2014). Drawing on literature on political authenticity and gendered self-presentation in politics, we conducted a quantitative manual content analysis of 855 social media posts from Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter (now X) by the three candidates running for the office of chancellor in the 2021 German federal election: Annalena Baerbock, Armin Laschet, and Olaf Scholz. These candidates were selected because they were the only ones with realistic prospects of winning the election and becoming chancellor throughout the campaign.

2. Political Authenticity in Electoral Decisions and Election Campaigns

The popularity of authenticity in political communication has inspired diverse research perspectives on the concept. While researchers have applied various definitions, one strand of research in communication and political science clearly distinguishes authenticity from related concepts, such as honesty, and defines it as the degree to which politicians remain true to themselves (Enli, 2025; Jones, 2016; Luebke, 2021). Accordingly, politicians are considered authentic when they appear unaffected by outside influences, reveal their true selves to the public, and demonstrate consistency in their views, insights, and actions, which are grounded in their convictions rather than strategic considerations (Luebke, 2021). This conceptualization by Luebke (2021) has served as a framework for recent empirical studies analyzing authenticity in political communication and providing evidence of its role in election campaigns and its impact on electoral decisions.

2.1. Authenticity and Voting

Scholars describe authenticity as a highly “sought-after quality” (Breitenstein et al., 2025, p. 241) in politics and view it as a key factor in the electoral success of individual politicians. Evidence from survey and experimental studies supports this claim and shows that voters tend to vote for candidates they perceive as authentic (Breitenstein et al., 2025; Kenny et al., 2021; Luebke & Engelmann, 2023; Luebke & Steffan, 2025b; Stiers et al., 2021). The effect of authenticity on voting patterns is evident across political systems and even emerges when voters evaluate hypothetical or fictional politicians (Breitenstein et al., 2025; Luebke & Steffan, 2025a). Evidence on the electoral role of authenticity aligns with political science research showing that candidate evaluations can exert short-term influences on electoral decisions (Lewis-Beck et al., 2008). As a component of candidate orientation, authenticity can influence voting but also depends on long-term factors such as party attachment (Luebke & Steffan, 2025b). In less personalized voting systems, as in Germany, candidate effects tend to be weaker because citizens do not elect the chancellor directly.

Studies comparing the relative influence of different candidate traits have demonstrated that, even when controlling for other traits, authenticity ratings continue to significantly affect voting decisions and are more influential than ratings for attributes such as empathy or sincerity (Kenny et al., 2021; Luebke & Steffan, 2025a; Stiers et al., 2021). However, these studies also find that ratings for competence and leadership have a greater influence on voting than perceived authenticity.

Previous research has identified various factors that influence whether and why politicians are perceived as authentic. Studies on perceived political authenticity find that authenticity ratings largely depend on voters’ political preferences. For example, voters often consider politicians more authentic the more they identify with their party (Luebke & Engelmann, 2023). Consequently, conservative politicians are more likely to be rated as authentic by conservative voters (Brewer et al., 2014). However, research has also shown that authenticity ratings are not solely determined by voters’ political attitudes, but can also be influenced by politicians’ self-presentation (Luebke & Steffan, 2025a; Stein et al., 2025). This finding raises the question of how politicians perform authenticity, particularly during election campaigns, to appear authentic to the electorate.

2.2. Performed Political Authenticity in Election Campaigns

Since voters tend to support candidates they perceive as authentic, we assume that politicians seek to appear authentic to the electorate, especially during election campaigns. Research on performed political authenticity defines it as “a specific type or mode of performance that aims to construct an authentic image for the audience” (Luebke, 2021, p. 638). This communicator perspective suggests an understanding of authenticity as a performative act in which politicians (aim to) present themselves as being true to themselves (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022; Luebke, 2021). The performance of authenticity, however, is not necessarily a sincere presentation of politicians’ inner selves to the outside world (Luebke, 2021) but rather the product of self-presentation strategies applied by politicians to create the impression that they are acting according to their inner belief system (Alexander, 2010; Enli, 2015; Kreiss et al., 2018). This creates a paradox: Authenticity must be performed to be perceived by voters, yet voters often prefer a controlled, strategic presentation of authenticity to a genuine, uncontrolled one (Holtz-Bacha, 2025).

The constructivist understanding of authenticity as a performance has led to the formulation of four concept dimensions that are derived from a review of existing literature in the field and illustrate how politicians perform authenticity: consistency, ordinariness, intimacy, and immediacy (Luebke, 2021). Scholars have applied these four dimensions to describe how politicians present themselves, but they have rarely quantified the level of performed political authenticity. Accordingly, performed political authenticity manifests first in the consistency of politicians’ self-presentation across time and contexts, e.g., through presenting similar messages, actions, and stances. Enli (2015) illustrates the consistency dimension by examining Barack Obama’s use of autobiographical narratives in campaign speeches to create an image of a man who remained true to his values and convictions. Sonnevend and Steiert (2022) show how former German Chancellor Angela Merkel cultivated an authentic image on social media through visual consistency by wearing similar formal attire and posting images with recurring gestures.

A second way to perform authenticity is through ordinariness. For example, politicians construct authenticity by presenting themselves as down-to-earth and close to “ordinary people” (Lacatus & Meibauer, 2022). Szebeni and Salojärvi (2022) illustrate how populist politicians use small displays of everydayness to appear authentic. Populists like Viktor Orbán and Donald Trump cultivate an image of an ordinary person who is one of the people by eating simple food, wearing ordinary clothes, and interacting with average citizens (Enli, 2025; Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022).

Third, the political performance of authenticity can mean revealing personal or private details and exposing intimate moments from non-public contexts to the public (intimacy). Thus, politicians can present themselves as authentic by sharing information about leisure activities, their childhood, or their roles as spouses or parents (Enli, 2015; Manning et al., 2017; Stein et al., 2025). Sharing images from private and family settings, or presenting oneself as a caring mother or father, can also contribute to an aura of political authenticity (Enli, 2015; Holtz-Bacha, 2025). The same holds true for the communication of private political views, which appears more authentic when linked to personal, biographical experiences (Enli, 2015; Gaden & Dumitrica, 2015).

Finally, performed authenticity shines through spontaneous and immediate actions, directly translating politicians' selves to others (immediacy). In addition to being immediate in a temporal sense through real-time communication, the spontaneity of the performance is particularly evident in the expression of emotions (Luebke, 2021). Other indicators of immediacy include impoliteness and politically incorrect language, as these give the impression that politicians are revealing their true selves (Theye & Melling, 2018). A study by Lacatus and Meibauer (2022) on the authenticity of right-wing populist politicians finds that these politicians use emotional, spontaneous communication to create the impression of authenticity.

The research on performed political authenticity that we referenced above provides valuable insights into how politicians present themselves as authentic during election campaigns. To date, however, few studies have examined the prevalence of authenticity and its facets in election campaigns. One exception is a study by Sposito (2025), which examines the frequency of authenticity performances in political texts by Brazilian and US presidents and presidential candidates since 1988 using an automated dictionary approach. The results show that authenticity is expressed more frequently by Brazilian politicians than by their US counterparts. However, the study does not observe a systematic increase in authenticity performances across settings in either country over time (Sposito, 2025). Nevertheless, this analysis does not include social media data.

Thus, there is still a lack of evidence on (a) how often politicians perform authenticity on social media, (b) which dimensions they use (and how often) to create an authentic appearance, and (c) how different politicians differ in their authenticity performances. This issue is even more pressing today given that social media has become an important source for political information for citizens and provides politicians with new technologies to perform these different authenticity elements (Holtz-Bacha, 2025; Manning et al., 2017; Shane, 2018). Since social media platforms allow politicians to bypass traditional gatekeepers and “speak directly to followers in a more personalized way” (Weeks et al., 2019, p. 375), they help politicians control the impressions others form of them (Kreiss et al., 2018). Due to the more dialogic, direct, and personal interaction among its users, social media are considered “an ideal platform to show authenticity and realness” (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022, p. 813). Thus, we pose the following research question:

RQ1: How and to what extent do politicians employ performed authenticity elements across social media?

3. Political Authenticity and Gender

Previous studies have shown that politicians' gender influences how they are perceived by the public and the strategies they employ to present themselves. Gender has also been discussed as a relevant factor for the perception and performance of authenticity (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Holtz-Bacha, 2025; Luebke & Steffan, 2025a). Audience research on political authenticity reveals that female politicians also experience a double bind when it comes to their perceived authenticity among voters (Holtz-Bacha, 2025). The double-bind problem refers to a dilemma faced by female politicians arising from stereotypical expectations of leaders (Jamieson, 1995). Since leadership qualities are typically associated with masculine traits, women must adopt behaviors traditionally considered masculine to be perceived as effective leaders (Eagly & Karau, 2002). However, if they appear confident and strong, they may be judged as unfriendly or unsympathetic. Conversely, if they emphasize more traditionally feminine traits, they contradict common expectations of leadership qualities and may be perceived as less competent (Bast et al., 2022). As citizens

often base their authenticity ratings on idealized notions of authentic femininity and masculinity, it may be (more) difficult for female politicians to be perceived as authentic (Hahl et al., 2018; Parry-Giles, 2014).

Stereotypical beliefs about traits associated with men or women shape how citizens evaluate politicians. These beliefs are commonly summarized along two dimensions: agentic and communal (Eagly & Karau, 2002). Men are generally thought to be more assertive, competitive, and dominant (agentic), whereas women are expected to be more friendly, emotional, and unselfish (communal; see Eagly & Wood, 2012; Mattan & Small, 2021; Paustian-Underdahl et al., 2014). Politicians are assumed to be aware of these stereotypes and respond to them in different ways, which Schneider (2014) summarizes as four strategies: exploiting gender stereotypes, counteracting them, using a mixture of stereotypical elements, or avoiding them altogether. Research on gendered self-presentation has yielded mixed findings, with moderate differences in the self-presentation of male and female politicians on social media (for an overview, see Magin et al., 2024).

Despite the lack of comparative results on the performed authenticity of male and female politicians, several authors have argued that men and women may perform it differently. For example, Liu et al. (2015) argue that presenting oneself as authentic also means behaving in accordance with gender stereotypes. The authors define authenticity not as something people have or are, but rather as something they *do*. They observe that authenticity is more likely to be attributed to individuals when they behave in accordance with gender stereotypes associated with masculinity or femininity in a given (professional) context, such as political leadership (Liu et al., 2015). Therefore, how politicians perform authenticity on social media may reflect responses to gender-based stereotypes held by citizens and the media (Mattan & Small, 2021; McGregor et al., 2017). Notably, surveys show that male and female politicians are often rated differently in terms of authenticity (e.g., Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). However, these differences in ratings disappear in experiments when self-presentation styles are controlled for, suggesting that they may result from candidates' gender-specific self-representation (Luebke & Steffan, 2025a). This reasoning is in line with assumptions from the strategic stereotype theory by Fridkin and Kenney (2014), which argues that politicians capitalize on stereotypes when they serve their self-presentation goals “while simultaneously trying to revise potentially damaging stereotypes” (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014, p. 15).

Similarly, Holtz-Bacha (2025) argues that female politicians use different strategies to perform authenticity than their male counterparts, while their performances also differ from each other depending on their political ideology. To this end, she analyzes the performed authenticity of various female politicians from the recent past and demonstrates that some deliberately exploited female stereotypes to appear authentic, while others actively challenged or simply disregarded stereotypes in their performance (Holtz-Bacha, 2025).

In our view, findings from previous research suggest we should also examine whether and how male and female politicians differ in the specific authenticity elements (consistency, ordinariness, intimacy, immediacy) they use to present themselves as authentic. We ask:

RQ2: How and to what extent do the two male and the one female politician differ in the performed authenticity elements they use on social media?

RQ2 asks about general differences in the authenticity elements used by male and female politicians on social media. However, given the findings from previous research, we expect differences in performed

intimacy specifically. Previous studies in this area demonstrate that women with different ideologies frequently employ self-presentation strategies that involve disclosing personal information (Holtz-Bacha, 2025). This approach includes, above all, constructing authenticity through the role of motherhood, which Holtz-Bacha (2025) describes as a “quasi-universal role for women” (p. 419). We therefore assume that:

H1: The female politician Annalena Baerbock uses more intimacy elements than the two male politicians Olaf Scholz and Armin Laschet.

4. Method

To answer our RQs and test the hypothesis, we conducted a manual content analysis of social media posts published by the three candidates running for chancellor in the 2021 German federal election: the female candidate Annalena Baerbock (Greens) as well as the two male candidates, Olaf Scholz (the Social Democrats [SPD]) and Armin Laschet (the Christian Democrats [CDU]). Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File provides an overview of the candidates’ characteristics, their popularity and election results in 2021, and their portrayal in the news media during the campaign. The CDU is a center-right party in Germany, whereas the SPD is considered a center-left party and the Greens a left party. CDU and SPD formed the governing coalition in Germany when this study was conducted.

We selected the three politicians because they were the only candidates from the 2021 election campaign with a realistic chance of becoming chancellor, as indicated by opinion polls at the time (Scholz, 2021). This situation is also well illustrated by the fact that TV broadcasters selected these three candidates to compete in three televised debates (Oltermann, 2021). Scholz, Laschet, and Baerbock are thus ideal cases for a quantitative comparative analysis of the role of authenticity in the self-presentation of key politicians for the campaign and election period. However, the fact that the sample includes only one woman and two men is a significant limitation for interpreting gender differences. We will discuss the implications of this limitation in more detail below.

All three candidates used Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter to post content during their campaigns. We examined authenticity elements across all 855 social media posts that the three candidates published on their accounts from June 12, 2021 (the date when all three parties had nominated their candidates) to September 26, 2021 (election day). The posts were distributed equally across Facebook ($n = 283$), Instagram ($n = 284$), and Twitter ($n = 288$). However, the three candidates differ in how often they posted on each social media platform (Baerbock: $n = 215$; Scholz: $n = 378$; Laschet: $n = 262$). While Annalena Baerbock posted actively on all three social media platforms, Olaf Scholz relied more often on Twitter ($n = 164$, 43.4%), and Armin Laschet posted more often on Instagram ($n = 110$, 42%) and Facebook ($n = 107$, 41%) than on Twitter. Three out of four social media posts from our sample contained at least one image ($n = 647$, 75.7%), but the share of social media posts with images varies across the three candidates (Baerbock: 65%; Scholz: 72%; Laschet: 90%). Overall, the two male candidates posted more frequently on social media and shared more pictures than Baerbock (see Appendix 2 in the Supplementary File). However, all three candidates seem to have tailored their posts to the platforms. Although they used similar topics, texts, and images on Instagram and Facebook, their Twitter posts were often shortened and split into multiple tweets. The candidates also published fewer posts that included images on Twitter.

We developed a new codebook to analyze authenticity elements in the textual and visual materials in social media posts. The codebook, data, and analyses are publicly available at: <https://osf.io/se3bz>

Politicians' performed political authenticity was operationalized based on the four concept dimensions: intimacy, immediacy, ordinariness, and consistency. This conceptualization is based on a literature synthesis by Luebke (2021) which organizes research on political authenticity and presents preliminary indicators for each dimension. Based on this synthesis and the additional literature cited in Section 2, we developed a set of indicators that were further refined through a close, inductive analysis of the empirical material. We coded intimacy when politicians released personal details (statements or pictures from their childhood or youth, expressions of personal wishes and thoughts), appeared in a private context (statements or pictures about their families, hobbies, or friends), and used confessional rhetoric (revealing negative details from their past, such as poor grades in school) or released images with remorseful or apologetic facial expressions linked to life reflections.

Immediacy was coded when politicians published content that seemed spontaneous (e.g., a spontaneous selfie with citizens), contained strong emotions (e.g., descriptions of emotional outbursts and intense emotions; pictures with deep laughter, crying, or anger-distorted face of candidates, but not everyday emotions such as "I was happy"), or used political incorrectness (e.g., slang or words used by young people).

We used three indicators to code ordinariness. Performed ordinariness was selected when posts contained markers of imperfection (e.g., admission of mistakes such as lateness or the wrong choice of words, images with visible mishaps such as clothing stains), down-to-earthness (e.g., textual or visual enactment of everyday situations such as shopping, riding the bus, buying and/or eating pizza, playing with children), and amateurism (e.g., trying niche activities, looking into a microscope in a science lab, blurred images).

Finally, we coded consistency based on the coherence between candidates' statements and actions in connection with the positions held by their parties. For this purpose, we compiled a list of slogans from each party's election campaign as a reference in the codebook (e.g., the Green candidate visits an organic farm in line with the ecological slogans of the Green Party). For example, a meeting between the Green Party candidate and representatives of the fossil fuel lobby would not have been coded as consistent if there was no reference to a campaign slogan. Furthermore, the category includes descriptions or pictures of the candidate at significant anniversaries and commemorations.

Two coders were trained to analyze the posts from all three platforms. To ensure reliable coding, each coder independently coded a random subset of about 10% of the final sample ($n = 84$). We calculated pairwise agreement and Krippendorff's alpha intercoder reliability ($K-\alpha$) values for all indicators using the R package tidycomm (Unkel et al., 2025). All variables achieved satisfactory pairwise agreement values (see Appendix 3 in the Supplementary File), above the threshold for content analysis (Frey et al., 2000). Krippendorff's alpha shows lower values for some variables, which may be due to insufficient data variability (Krippendorff, 2011). This finding indicates that some of the categorical variables are highly skewed. In this case, using percent agreement is preferable to calculating Krippendorff's alpha as random agreement is minimal (Feng, 2014). All statistical analyses were performed using R Version 4.5.1 (for packages, see R script on OSF).

5. Results

RQ1 asked about the prevalence of performed authenticity and its elements in the 2021 German federal election. To answer RQ1, we calculated the share of posts that contained at least one authenticity indicator per dimension. Table 1 shows that the three politicians regularly use authenticity elements and rely on all four authenticity dimensions in their social media self-presentation. Across the candidates, three out of four campaign posts contain at least one authenticity element. They most frequently used the consistency dimension, constructing authenticity through similar messages, actions, and stances in nearly two out of three posts (62.6%). In contrast, the three politicians rely much less frequently on ordinariness (26%) or immediacy (12.7%). Intimacy is the least salient dimension with only around 4% of posts offering insights into politicians' private lives or sharing intimate moments or personal information.

Table 1. Share of social media posts with at least one authenticity element (in %).

Performed Authenticity	Politicians				Chi-Square-Tests	
	Baerbock (female)	Laschet (male)	Scholz (male)	Total	Chi ²	<i>p</i>
Authenticity	70.7	75.2	78.6	75.6	4.63	0.099
Intimacy	7.9 ^a	1.5 ^b	3.7 ^{ab}	4.1	12.51	0.002
Immediacy	24.2 ^a	11.1 ^b	7.4 ^b	12.7	35.64	<0.001
Ordinariness	34.4 ^a	14.9 ^b	28.8 ^a	26	26.34	0.001
Consistency	54 ^a	67.9 ^b	63.8 ^{ab}	62.6	10.27	0.006

Notes: *N* = 855 social media posts; 7.9% of social media posts by Baerbock contain at least one intimacy indicator; cells with different superscript letters are significantly different; cells with the same superscript are not statistically different (pairwise Fisher's tests with Bonferroni correction, $\alpha = 0.05$).

RQ2 asked about differences in the prevalence of performed authenticity and its elements among the two male (Scholz and Laschet) and the one female candidate (Baerbock). Although our study is based on a complete census of posts from the election campaign, we also calculated global chi-square tests and post hoc pairwise analyses to better interpret the observed associations. When we compare the share of posts containing at least one authenticity element for all three candidates (Table 1), we find that authenticity is prevalent across the candidates, though the male candidates, Olaf Scholz (78.6%) and Armin Laschet (75.2%), have slightly more posts with authenticity than Baerbock (70.7%). However, a global chi-square test shows no significant association between the politicians and the degree of authenticity they perform.

We find greater differences in performed authenticity when comparing how often politicians rely on specific authenticity dimensions in their self-presentation. Although all three politicians most often emphasize consistency, the shares across the dimensions differ significantly between candidates. The two male politicians, Laschet and Scholz, rely more frequently on consistency than Baerbock, although only the difference between Laschet and Baerbock is statistically significant. Baerbock, on the other hand, publishes significantly more posts in which she constructs her authenticity through immediacy than Scholz and Laschet (RQ2). Post hoc analyses show that Baerbock presents herself significantly more often as intimate than Laschet, while Laschet presents himself less often as ordinary compared with both Baerbock and Scholz. These differences are also largely reflected in the various indicators within the dimensions (for details, see Appendix 4 in the Supplementary File).

In answering RQ2, we find that the female politician presents herself more often as down-to-earth than the male politicians and establishes her authenticity more strongly through spontaneous, direct, emotional statements and insights into her private life. However, the only significant gender difference appears in immediacy. In terms of intimacy, this means that Baerbock shares more personal details about her life, such as references to her family or childhood. However, this difference is only significant compared to Laschet, not to Scholz. This result leads us to reject the hypothesis that the female politician in our sample uses elements of intimacy more often than the two male politicians.

To test whether the extent and nature of performed authenticity vary across social media platforms and campaign phases, we also calculated five logistic regressions (Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File). The dependent variable in each model was the presence of at least one authenticity indicator per dimension. The predictors included the politician's gender, a dummy variable for the hot campaign phase (four weeks before the election), the number of images per post, and dummies for Instagram and Facebook (reference category: Twitter).

The results show that gender significantly influences the use of individual authenticity dimensions (see Models 2-5 in Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File). Male politicians are more likely to rely on consistency ($OR = 1.65, p = 0.003$; Model 5), while they are less likely to perform intimacy ($OR = 0.28, p < 0.001$; Model 2), immediacy ($OR = 0.32, p < 0.001$; Model 3), and ordinariness ($OR = 0.58, p = 0.006$; Model 4). We also find platform effects: The likelihood of performed authenticity is higher on Facebook ($OR = 1.87, p = 0.005$) and Instagram ($OR = 2.27, p < 0.001$) than on Twitter (Model 1). This correlation holds across all four dimensions of authenticity which occur more frequently on Instagram and Facebook than on Twitter. Since we have also controlled for the number of images per post, these differences cannot be attributed solely to differences in platform architecture but are likely the result of different platform strategies. Finally, the analysis of the campaign phase as an additional influencing factor shows that the overall extent of performed authenticity does not change throughout the campaign ($OR = 1.13, p = 0.52$; Model 1). However, the campaign phase positively influences the occurrence of intimacy ($OR = 4.61, p < 0.001$; Model 2) and immediacy ($OR = 1.61, p = 0.045$; Model 3). These two dimensions are performed more frequently as the election campaign progresses.

6. Discussion

Authenticity has become an increasingly important criterion among the electorate when evaluating political candidates (Stiers et al., 2021), and politicians apply different authenticity strategies to create an authentic image during election campaigns (Sposito, 2025). Social media is often regarded as an ideal environment for performing authenticity because it provides politicians with means to bypass gatekeepers and directly promote a positive image among citizens (Szebeni & Salojärvi, 2022; Weeks et al., 2019). In particular, social media allows politicians to construct an authentic image by sharing spontaneous, unfiltered insights into their work and personality (Shane, 2018). However, neither the extent to which politicians perform authenticity on social media nor the strategies they use to present themselves as authentic have been analyzed systematically. Moreover, potential differences in the prevalence and styles of performed authenticity between male and female candidates have not been studied in previous research. To address these gaps, we developed a new codebook for the quantitative analysis of performed authenticity on social media. Using this novel instrument, we conducted a manual quantitative content analysis of social

media posts published by the three chancellor candidates during the 2021 federal election campaign in Germany.

Our study found that authenticity was a prevalent aspect in the German candidates' self-presentation across three social media platforms during the 2021 campaign. The politicians in our sample frequently used social media as a strategic tool to present themselves as authentic candidates. We identified at least one element related to authenticity in three out of four social media posts during the election campaign. While we cannot compare these numbers with the prevalence of other candidate traits during the same campaign, we interpret this as evidence of the prominence of political authenticity in digital election campaign communications in Germany.

The three candidates constructed their authenticity using all four authenticity dimensions on social media, but consistency was by far the most used of the four dimensions. The German candidates thus often aimed to highlight the stability of their political stances and convictions during their campaigns. Conversely, we observe that the candidates used the facets of ordinariness, immediacy, and intimacy less frequently on social media. This pattern may indicate a general focus in the 2021 campaign on presenting candidates as authentic representatives of their parties' political messages rather than showing their emotional and personal sides. This view resonates with earlier findings on personalization in German campaign communication, which suggest that candidates tend to share more professional insights and fewer details on their private lives (Hermans & Vergeer, 2013). Since the three candidates used fewer ordinariness, intimacy, and immediacy strategies, they rarely harnessed the potential of social media to construct an intimate or more emotional image.

However, we also find that the three politicians differ in how often they performed authenticity and how often they relied on specific aspects of authenticity in their performance. First, we observe slight differences in how often the candidates performed authenticity in their posts. Olaf Scholz and Armin Laschet, the two male politicians, have a slightly higher share of social media posts in which authenticity elements were present compared to Annalena Baerbock, the female politician. This finding suggests that the candidates and their parties may have placed different levels of importance on authenticity in their social media campaigns.

Second, and more striking, the three candidates differ in the strategies they used to construct authenticity. Baerbock performed authenticity significantly more often via immediacy than Laschet and Scholz. She also used more intimacy elements than the other candidates, although this difference is only significant in comparison to Laschet. There are several possible explanations for the differences in self-presentation among the three candidates.

The varied use of authenticity dimensions may result from candidates' ideological differences. For example, one factor that may indicate an ideological difference is that Baerbock and Scholz, who ran for left and center-left parties, emphasized ordinariness more than Laschet, who ran for a conservative party. One explanation could be that politicians from left parties, with their stronger focus on social policy, have more opportunities or a higher interest in presenting themselves as down-to-earth and close to the people. Differences in immediacy among the candidates may be explained by their parties' general election campaign strategies. The Green Party and its candidate may have run a campaign that was more emotionally oriented than the other two parties, encouraging the use of immediacy elements by their candidate, such as emotions, spontaneity, and the embrace of less technical language (e.g., slang). This style may also be more compatible with Baerbock's profile, as she is younger than Scholz and Laschet.

However, the differences in how politicians present themselves may also be interpreted as reactions to stereotypical expectations. Male and female candidates more often use stereotypes that serve their presentational goals and reject those that may harm them (Fridkin & Kenney, 2014). Accordingly, Baerbock's greater focus on performing authenticity through posting spontaneous, emotional content (immediacy) aligns more closely with stereotypical notions of womanhood. While Baerbock's performed authenticity is more focused on the emotional and private dimension, the male candidates tend to rely more on the consistency dimension. According to our operationalization of consistency, male politicians more often present themselves as authentic representatives of their parties' programs.

Baerbock's more immediate self-presentation may also be explained within the context of the campaign. Shortly before the election, polls showed her lagging behind the two male candidates, with her party losing ground—a situation likely worsened by negative media coverage (see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File). At the same time, her party ran a highly personalized campaign (Holtz-Bacha, 2023). Therefore, her more intimate and spontaneous style may have been a strategic move to align her social media image with a more personal side to counter declining support.

We also assumed that the prevalence of authenticity and its individual dimensions are likely influenced by factors that interact with or transcend the gender of politicians. The regression models with additional contextual factors, such as campaign-specific dynamics, indeed show that intimacy becomes more important over time for all three politicians (Appendix 5 in the Supplementary File). During the hot campaign phase, the level of performed intimacy and immediacy increases, though the overall frequency of performed authenticity remains stable throughout the different phases of the campaign. While campaign communication often intensifies during the final phase of an election campaign (Peeters et al., 2023), the level of performed authenticity did not change throughout the 2021 election campaign.

Beyond campaign timing, our analysis also highlights the potential of different platforms for performing authenticity. Politicians in our sample used more authentic elements on Instagram and Facebook than on Twitter. Since our model controls for the number of images, this variance cannot be attributed solely to technical differences. It is more plausible that politicians consider Twitter as a less suitable environment for presenting themselves as authentic. Given Twitter's reputation as a platform for political and journalistic elites (Highfield & Leaver, 2016; Steffan, 2020), politicians may primarily use it to express political views and comment on events rather than for personal self-presentation. These differences between the platform communities also help explain the slightly higher performed authenticity on Instagram than on Facebook. While Facebook tends to appeal to a broad user base, Instagram is particularly popular with a younger audience (Steffan, 2020).

7. Limitations and Conclusion

This study is among the first to apply a quantitative approach to measure performed authenticity and thus comes with limitations that need to be noted and addressed in future research. First, we find that politicians in our sample of German candidates running for chancellor often use authenticity elements in their self-presentation. This result supports assumptions from the literature that politicians try to present themselves as authentic on social media and that performed authenticity is an essential part of modern election campaign communication. However, our study lacks a benchmark, such as the prevalence of other

traits, to further evaluate the role of political authenticity on social media. Future research comparing the prominence of authenticity with that of other traits would provide a reasonable basis for further interpreting our findings. The same applies to a longitudinal perspective that compares the prevalence of performed authenticity during and outside of election campaigns.

Second, our data cannot clearly indicate whether the performed authenticity found in our study is the result of an intentional strategy by politicians and their campaign teams or a byproduct of other self-presentation goals. The frequent use of consistency elements across candidates suggests that they were not only concerned with pure self-presentation but also aimed to emphasize party and program positions in their posts. Interviews with politicians and campaign teams could provide further insights into the importance of authenticity and the strategies used in campaigns.

Third, the study analyzed the performed authenticity of lead candidates in Germany and thus investigated a multi-party context with a less personalized voting system. In contexts where individual politicians play a greater role in the electoral system, authenticity may be even more important and therefore even more prevalent in politicians' self-presentation. Furthermore, considering the various dimensions of authenticity, it is also possible that the focus on consistency is a consequence of German consensus democracy. Since German parties have to compromise in order to form a government, politicians may be more interested in presenting themselves as authentic by aligning with party positions.

Moreover, we examined the profiles of three German candidates who ran for chancellor. These candidates were the only federal politicians who could reasonably be expected to win the election (Scholz, 2021). Unlike in an artificial experimental study, the candidates differed according to several characteristics, including gender, party affiliation, and age (see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File). The observed differences among them may be explained by one or more of these factors, or by their interactions. Our findings regarding candidate and gender differences must thus be interpreted with caution. Future studies examining performed authenticity should analyze a larger number of female and male politicians in Germany and other national contexts to assess whether our results can be extended beyond our small candidate sample and the 2021 election campaign. Nevertheless, the present study provides a new, now-tested instrument for the field to address these limitations in the future and quantify the prevalence of performed authenticity and its impact on social media.

Fourth, our content analysis measures performed authenticity using four dimensions, but does not provide detailed information about strategic differences within these dimensions. Therefore, it is likely that additional variance exists within the dimensions. For instance, politicians from different parties and genders may employ distinct strategies to convey ordinariness or intimacy. Future research that analyzes these more nuanced differences in performances could contribute to this field by revealing additional, potentially more significant variance within dimensions. This also includes future work that, unlike ours, uses multiple indicators of consistency. Our operationalization of consistency as meeting the public's general expectations of a party's candidate is limited and leaves room for improvement.

Despite these limitations, the study makes several contributions to our understanding of current campaign communication and the role of authenticity in election campaigns. It is among the first to apply a quantitative approach to investigate the prevalence of politicians' performed authenticity during campaigns.

To this end, we provide a novel operationalization of political authenticity as a multidimensional construct for standardized content analysis, enabling analysis of its performance across different facets of authenticity on social media (Luebke, 2021). This approach allows for systematic comparisons of performed authenticity across candidates and platforms based on four conceptual dimensions. Our results show that politicians regularly present themselves as authentic in election campaigns, and that the authenticity they perform differs across candidates and social media platforms. Finally, this study advances research on authenticity and gender from a performance perspective, providing preliminary evidence in a field that has primarily focused on audience perception.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The codebook, the data, and the analyses are publicly available at: <https://osf.io/se3bz>

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used for language editing and the debugging of R code.

Supplementary Material

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

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About the Authors



Simon M. Luebke (PhD) is a research associate (PostDoc) at the Chair of Empirical Communication and Media Research at the Institute for Communication and Media Studies at Leipzig University, Germany. His research focuses on political communication, particularly election campaign communication and media effects research. Photo by Lena Fleischer.



Ines Engelmann (PhD) is full professor for communication science with a focus on empirical methods at the Institute of Communication Science at Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany. Her research interests include political communication, journalism, and empirical methods. Photo by Jürgen Scheere.