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MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION

Volume 13

2025

Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service

Open Access Journal

ISSN: 2183-2439

Edited by Maud Reveilhac and Nic DePaula

Media and Communication, 2025, Volume 13
Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service

Published by Cogitatio Press
Rua Fialho de Almeida 14, 2º Esq.,
1070–129 Lisbon
Portugal

Design by Typografia®
http://www.typografia.pt/en/

Cover image: © Photo by Julian Christ on Unsplash

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Available online at: www.cogitatiopress.com/mediaandcommunication

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 11648
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.11648

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EDITORIAL

Open Access Journal

Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service

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Submitted: 29 October 2025 **Published:** 25 November 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

Social media have become essential channels for government communication with the public, creating opportunities for engagement with citizens, greater complexities in messaging and interactions, and distinct challenges in addressing government-citizen relations. This thematic issue brings together several articles that explore how governments, officials, and citizens interact on social media platforms. Collectively, the contributions illuminate how social media reshape communicative roles, redefine the boundaries between journalism, propaganda, and public service, and challenge democratic accountability. The studies employ a wide range of theoretical frameworks (from mediatization and affordance theory to principal-agent models and boundary work theory), distinct contexts (such as crisis communication, health communication, and military intervention), and several methodological approaches including text mining, machine learning, and mixed-methods approaches, among others.

Keywords

communication policy; digital government; information policy; government communication; public sector communication; political communication; social media

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media sites and platforms have become indispensable to government communication across all levels of administration, from municipalities to ministries and federal departments and to supranational institutions. What was once an optional supplement to press releases and official statements has evolved into an essential channel for informing, engaging, and managing relations with citizens. Yet, as

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governmental bodies increasingly adopt social media to promote transparency, participation, and their own policies and political prerogatives, these means of communication have also introduced new risks—of polarization, emotional contagion, misinformation, and loss of control over public narratives.

This thematic issue brings together a diverse collection of studies that explore how governments, officials, and citizens interact in the digitally mediated communication environments of social media platforms. This is an important and timely area of research given the growing centrality of social media in society, the fragile state of modern democracies, and the potential use of these digital tools to impact government-citizen relations. The articles include a narrative review of the field, qualitative interviews with government officials, quantitative analyses of message characteristics and engagement metrics, and discussions across national contexts, levels of government, and distinct periods. In general, the articles point to the multi-disciplinary nature of this research, conflicts between political and bureaucratic norms, and pressures from social media logics. The research also points to novel trends in policy promotion via social media influencers, important factors in crisis and health communication, and the impact of agency and communicator qualities on how citizens respond to government social media messages.

Collectively, the contributions illuminate how social media reshape communicative roles, redefine the boundaries between journalism, propaganda, and public service, and challenge democratic accountability. The studies employ a wide range of theoretical frameworks, diverse contexts, and several methodological approaches, discussed in greater detail below.

2. Articles in This Thematic Issue

We open the issue with Hansson and DePaula (2025) whose review essay provides a conceptual map of the field. They identify two central axes of research: one distinguishing the literature across senders, messages, media, audiences, and effects; and another differentiating the domains of government policy and public administration. This framework anchors the thematic issue, situating the empirical studies that follow within a broader scholarly landscape and outlining directions for future inquiry into government social media communication.

The next set of articles examines the transformation of governmental structures and routines under digitalization. Johansson and Johansson (2025) analyze how social media are integrated into the executive branch, using Sweden as a case study. Their work conceptualizes social media as both a communicative resource and a catalyst for institutional adaptation, revealing how ministries have normalized social media through “strategic complementarity” with traditional media. Similarly, Karlsen et al. (2025) explore the communicative balancing act of Norwegian cabinet ministers who use Facebook simultaneously as heads of ministries and as party politicians. Their findings indicate that social media accentuates self-personalization and political branding of executive communication, potentially reshaping cabinet unity and decision-making.

The following group of articles turns to local and institutional practices of engagement. Haman et al. (2025) show that municipal adoption of Facebook in the Czech Republic is strongly shaped by organizational capacity and resource constraints, resulting in a digital divide between large and small municipalities. Mabillard and Zumofen (2025) extend this inquiry to the Nordic context, exploring how communication managers conceptualize and measure engagement. They find that despite widespread reliance on

quantitative metrics, there is a growing recognition of the need for qualitative, dialogic approaches to evaluating citizen interaction with governments.

Moving from structure to content and emotion, Yadlin et al. (2025) examine emotional responses to Israeli politicians' Facebook messages during civic and military crises. Their analysis of 25,000 posts reveals that emotional reactions on social media not only differ across types of periods, but social media may amplify negative reactions and may be shaped by the limited expressive affordances of platforms themselves. This insight underscores the importance of emotional design in governmental crisis communication, the limits and control of platform affordances, and the implications for public trust and democratic resilience.

Trust emerges as a central theme across several contributions. Schwaderer (2025) highlights that in crises, who communicates may matter more than what is communicated. By analyzing 744,000 Twitter posts from six European countries during the Covid-19 pandemic, he finds that experts tend to elicit more positive sentiment than politicians and that women communicators may enjoy a "trust advantage" rooted in relational communication traits. Complementing this perspective on trust, Huang and Wang (2025) investigate how journalists in China operate as outsourced government social media managers, navigating tensions between journalistic and bureaucratic logics of the one-party state. Their findings reveal how hybrid professional identities shape communication legitimacy under authoritarian constraints.

At the supranational level, Moreno-Cabanillas et al. (2025) explore how the European Commission can foster political trust among young citizens through social media. Their comparative study across five EU countries finds that dialogue-based and participatory communication strategies hold the greatest potential to build trust, particularly when tailored to different socioeconomic and educational backgrounds.

Several contributions interrogate the interplay between culture, influence, and new platforms. Reveilhac (2025) provides a comparative typology of government–influencer collaborations in France, the US, and Canada, revealing how states increasingly harness digital personalities to align public perception with policy goals amid evolving regulatory regimes. Cușnir (2025) turns to TikTok to analyze Romania's Ministries of Defence and Internal Affairs, showing how the logic of "govtainment"—the spectacularization of government communication—shapes institutional visibility even as it fails to guarantee higher engagement. Smoliarova (2025) similarly explores the role of influencers by focusing on Russian-speaking female bloggers who became de facto government communicators during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, bridging information gaps for migrant audiences and illustrating the democratization—and moral dilemmas—of this type of public health and crisis communication.

The issue concludes with Morselli et al. (2025), whose study of vaccine discourse in South Africa demonstrates the dangers of governmental retreat from online spaces. Using agent-based modeling of over 480,000 tweets, the authors show that the increased prevalence of antivaccine narratives could be explained by the decrease in the communication of official and mainstream media actors, thus also potentially contributing to declining vaccination rates. Their work powerfully illustrates the stakes of digital inaction for public health and policy legitimacy.

Together, these contributions demonstrate that government social media communication is no longer a peripheral activity but a central component of governance itself—with far-reaching implications for trust in

government, emotional interactions, resource management, legitimacy, and accountability. They reveal the promises and perils of the increased mediatization of government and society and the several dimensions of interactions between citizens and state actors. As digital infrastructures evolve, so too must our understanding of these platforms and how government actors are using them to constrain and to sustain democracy and public service.

Acknowledgments

We are deeply thankful to all the reviewers who helped make this thematic issue possible.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10697
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10697

REVIEW

Open Access Journal

Government Communication on Social Media: Research Foci, Domains, and Future Directions

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Submitted: 6 May 2025 **Accepted:** 13 August 2025 **Published:** 23 September 2025

Issue: This review is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

The aim of this review essay is to draw attention to the diversity of work done in the field of government social media communication research. It is a rapidly developing area of study that has been approached from multiple disciplinary perspectives and a variety of research traditions. We suggest that studies of government social media communication may be broadly classified based on two characteristics: (a) whether their focus is mainly on the senders, messages, media, audiences, or effects of communication; and (b) the domains of government policy and public administration that they address. We review existing literature along this classification and conclude by suggesting fruitful directions for future research.

Keywords

government communication; government information; policy communication; political communication; public sector communication; social media

1. Introduction

Government communication is the communication of political executives and administrative officeholders. It may be conceived as a subfield of political communication (Canel & Sanders, 2012) and distinct from other subfields, such as party communication (focused on the messaging of political candidates, and electoral campaigning), parliamentary communication (focused on legislative matters and oversight of government), political journalism (focused on how political issues are represented and discussed in news media), and political activism (focused on how social movements and critical citizens try to bring about changes in government). Government communication may also be seen as a subfield of public sector communication

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(Lovari & Valentini, 2020; Macnamara, 2025), which is a broader notion that also encompasses non-governmental entities such as NGOs, state monopolies, and businesses that provide public services.

Government communication essentially differs from other subfields of political and public sector communication because government officeholders and institutions wield coercive power: they can enforce laws and apply physical force, and the instructions they give can be backed by a threat or sanction (Edelman, 1971; Graber, 2003). Government communication may be used to seek compliance with a policy or demand and to legitimize and/or extend the power of an agency or individual (Hansson, 2017). Government communication can provide a public benefit such as data and information upon which citizens and businesses make decisions (e.g., financial, environmental, health-related). Moreover, in democracies, government communication can serve a transparency function and provide legitimacy via open government and truthful communication about their internal affairs such as their plans, budgets, and efficiency measures (Graber, 2003). Government communication practices are shaped and constrained by existing laws, the culture and ethics of public administration (Yudof, 1983), and the self-preservation tendencies of individuals and organizations (Hansson, 2018; Hood, 2011). As government communication is funded by taxes and performs several crucial functions in societies, it tends to be subjected to a high level of public scrutiny and research. Government communication in modern democracies is often expected to be impartial and autonomous of party politics (DePaula & Hansson, 2025; Russmann et al., 2020).

Governments disseminate and gather information and interact with citizens via various media, including print and broadcast outlets, telephone, and the internet. Since the 2000s, due to the global rise of social media usage, governments have also integrated these platforms into their communication activities. The term "social media" may have been first coined in 1994 (Aichner et al., 2021), but it is now associated with the various web technologies of user-generated content, including social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, LinkedIn), microblogging platforms (e.g., X, previously Twitter), media sharing sites (e.g., YouTube, Pinterest), messaging applications (e.g., WhatsApp, Snapchat), and discussion/community forums (e.g., Reddit).

Government communication practices, including on social media, can be studied from a variety of disciplinary perspectives. Previous reviews of social media in government (e.g., Medaglia & Zheng, 2017; Sandoval-Almazan et al., 2021) have been largely restricted to the literature on information systems, public administration, and e-government, thereby overlooking contributions from other relevant fields, such as linguistics (e.g., DePaula & Hansson, 2025; Hansson & Page, 2023; Love et al., 2023), political communication (e.g., Zhou et al., 2023), political science and international relations (e.g., Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2023), military studies (e.g., Nissen, 2015), and disaster research (e.g., Wukich, 2016).

In this essay, we provide a narrative review of the diverse scholarly literature on government communication on social media with the goal of devising a heuristic map of the field and progressing it forward. We dissect the existing academic work in terms of research focus, namely: the senders, messages, media, audiences, and effects studied. We then outline some of the domains of government communication that have received more academic attention so far. We conclude by suggesting future directions for research.

2. Foci of Government Social Media Communication Research

Communication processes can be analytically divided into elements such as senders/sources, messages, channels, recipients, and effects (Lasswell, 1948). We suggest that studies into government social media communication may be categorized based on which of these dimensions of the communication process they mainly focus on. Since the focus of the study determines the methodological choices, we also note the distinct methods employed under each category.

2.1. Senders

Sender-focused studies of government social media communication are interested in the actors (officeholders, agencies) and processes (tasks, routines, regulations) within government organizations.

Power is spread vertically between different levels of government, and accordingly, studies may focus on actors operating at either local, regional/state, national/federal, or international level. There are also two essentially different types of senders: (a) personal social media accounts of specific individuals—usually top officeholders such as presidents, prime ministers, governors, and mayors; and (b) impersonal/institutional accounts of government departments and agencies.

While research has addressed communication by government agencies at local (e.g., Bonsón et al., 2015), state (e.g., Thackeray et al., 2013), federal, and international levels (e.g., Guidry et al., 2023), differences across levels have rarely been compared (see, e.g., Zhou et al., 2023). There is also little research on the coordination of government social media communication between officials and agencies. However, a recent study of United States cities using X showed "centralized coordination nodes" from the mayor's office mobilizing responses to the Covid-19 emergency across local agencies (Zeemering, 2021), pointing to the importance of coordination.

Social media platforms have been integrated into the communication practices of supra-national government officials as well, such as the spokespersons for the European Commission (Krzyżanowski, 2018; Özdemir et al., 2025) and the United Nations (Ecker-Ehrhardt, 2023). These studies suggest that official communication on social media is increasingly individualized and personalized: Spokespersons post to personal profiles, use informal language, express emotions, and engage in positive self-presentation. The strong individualization may contribute to the downplaying of democratic concerns and undermine the institutions' claims to "rational-legal" (depersonalized) authority.

Methodologically, sender-focused studies may involve ethnographic observation (e.g., Levenshus, 2016) as well as interviews, questionnaires, and document analysis (e.g., Criado & Villodre, 2022; Gregory, 2019; Torpan et al., 2023; Zeemering, 2021). Some studies have used regression analysis to measure the extent to which the type of institutional account had on message sharing (Bonsón et al., 2015; Sutton et al., 2020), as well as semantic network analysis to measure the degree to which different senders included political terms in their messages (Zhou et al., 2023). Social network analysis has also been used to assess the influence of political and government actors in the sharing of health information (Hagen et al., 2018).

2.2. Messages

Message-focused studies are interested in understanding the content of government communication, including the information that is propagated and the forms in which information and opinions are expressed. The two broad methodological approaches to government message analysis are content analysis (e.g., DePaula et al., 2018) and discourse analysis (e.g., Hansson & Page, 2023).

Studies of government social media messages usually employ content analysis to understand the nature and purpose of the messages. These studies either focus on a specific domain or context (e.g., emergency communication, police agencies, public health) or are more generalized. Messages are often categorized as serving either the purpose of information provision, promotion, input-seeking, or request for collaboration/participation (DePaula et al., 2018; Gruzd et al., 2018; Mergel, 2013; Wukich, 2022). In crisis and health contexts, additional message elements are examined, for example the presence of "fear-appeal" (Yao et al., 2024) and "efficacy" related content (Guidry et al., 2023). In some studies, content analyses have focused on "themes" or "topics" of messages (Ho et al., 2024; Lwin et al., 2018) or examined message elements to assess political influences on the content (DePaula, 2023; DePaula & Hansson, 2025).

Scholars of political language and argumentation are interested in a more detailed exploration of text, talk, and images that reflect social and cultural norms and point to specific goals of the messages. For instance, discourse analysts have looked at how government actors try to legitimize their policies (Hansson & Page, 2022, 2023), how populist political leaders commit argumentative fallacies in their social media posts (Macagno, 2022), and how they may appeal to conservative audiences by evoking "a homeland threatened by the dangerous other" (Kreis, 2017, p. 607).

Discourse analysis has also been applied to describe language aggression in official social media messages. For example, President Donald Trump's posts on X have been analyzed in terms of how he uses evaluative language to attack the character of his political opponents (A. S. Ross & Caldwell, 2020), how he promotes himself and provokes conflict (Wignell et al., 2021), and how he accuses journalists of spreading false information while spreading falsehoods himself (A. S. Ross & Rivers, 2018). Additionally, offensive uses of language and images targeted at foreign adversaries have been traced in the official diplomatic tweets of Russia and Iran (e.g., Altahmazi, 2022; Hansson, 2024). Self-presentation and "image-repair" strategies have also been examined across distinct types of government agencies (DePaula et al., 2018; Masngut & Mohamad, 2021).

2.3. Media

Media-focused studies are interested in the development and adoption of digital platforms, their affordances, the broader information and communication technology architecture, as well as the technological and legal implications of particular social media platforms for governments and the public.

The adoption of social media by government has been studied since 2010, first within the public relations and digital government literature (e.g., Avery et al., 2010; Bertot et al., 2010). Scholars imagined how new media could be used for anti-corruption practices, transparency, accountability, and efficiency, as the fast, open, and distributed nature of social media could enable individuals and institutions to analyze data and point to

issues in government processes (Bertot et al., 2010; Chun & Luna Reyes, 2012). These early studies traced the growing adoption of social media in the United States and Europe by federal, state, and local agencies (Bonsón et al., 2012; Hofmann et al., 2013; Mergel, 2013; Thackeray et al., 2013). The adoption process has been shaped by multiple factors such as agency innovativeness, having an internal information technology manager (Oliveira & Welch, 2013), as well as the level of e-participation and income level of the population (Guillamón et al., 2016).

Recent studies show how social media has been institutionalized in government agencies in many countries and at various levels of government (Criado & Villodre, 2022; Figenschou, 2020; Mergel, 2016; Raković & Dakić, 2024). Research suggests that Facebook and X are the major applications used in the United States and Europe (Gonçalves et al., 2015; Guillamón et al., 2016; Wukich, 2022) and in several other countries such as Mexico (Sandoval-Almazan et al., 2018), Brazil (Rodrigues et al., 2020), Israel (Yavetz & Aharony, 2023), and Malaysia (Masngut & Mohamad, 2021). The adoption of YouTube (Bonsón & Bednárová, 2018), Instagram (Malik et al., 2021), and TikTok (Babic & Simpson, 2024; Desoutter, 2025) by government agencies has also been examined. In China, much of the research is focused on government use of Weibo and WeChat (Q. Chen et al., 2020; Hou et al., 2022; Liao et al., 2020).

Each social media platform has distinct affordances, that is, possibilities for action, and distinct ways they are adopted. For example, YouTube affords the possibility to share long-form videos, whereas Instagram only enables the sharing of short videos and pictures. Both Facebook and X enable the posting of text, video, or images, and enable users to reply to the content. However, X has been found to be used more for public information (Lin & Qiu, 2013), whereas Facebook is used for "shared identities" (Spiliotopoulos & Oakley, 2020) and "social interaction" (Voorveld et al., 2018) and is associated with higher levels of privacy concern and bonding social capital (Shane-Simpson et al., 2018). A study comparing Covid-19 pandemic communication of public health agencies found more of a "data and policy orientation" for X messages, whereas Facebook showed more of a "local and personal orientation"—although the content was similar across platforms based on several dimensions (DePaula et al., 2022).

2.4. Audiences

Audience-focused studies look at audience characteristics and behavior to understand how social media users respond to and engage with government messages. Methods for exploring this include audience surveys (e.g., Wang et al., 2025), discourse analysis of audience responses (e.g., Page & Hansson, 2024), and the analysis of social media engagement metrics such as "likes" and "shares" (e.g., Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018).

As social media adoption grows among the population, government accounts amass thousands to millions of followers. However, there are few studies examining the characteristics of audiences of government social media. From the research that has addressed this, some have found most users of local government accounts on X to be "light users" (Shwartz-Asher et al., 2016) and to be more female than male (Gonçalves et al., 2015). Examination of media organizations as specific types of followers has shown that in Western Europe official government accounts have a larger share of media followers compared to the accounts of heads of state (Reveilhac & Trembovelskyi, 2025).

Much of the research on government communication on social media is focused on how citizens, individuals, and/or site users respond to government content on these platforms (Gruzd et al., 2018; Malik et al., 2021; Yao et al., 2024). There are three major potential ways for users to do this: (a) share or retransmit the government post to their networks; (b) react to the content with a pre-defined emotional category, usually a like or thumbs up button, but also other emotions like sad, surprise, and anger (e.g., B. Ross et al., 2018); and (c) respond to the content in terms of comments (e.g., Hand & Ching, 2020).

Studies comparing responses to personal and institutional social media accounts in the context of health crises have shown that personal accounts of officeholders (e.g., mayor, governor) may be associated with higher message sharing than institutional accounts (Sutton et al., 2020), but both political and institutional actors may be perceived by users as influential and trustworthy in retransmitting health information (Hagen et al., 2018).

Social media users may respond to governmental posts by blaming officeholders for their incompetence, dishonesty, corruption, or indecisiveness (Hansson et al., 2022). Disaffected citizens may express blame in their comments/replies even in response to seemingly positive governmental messages, such as officeholders thanking someone (Page & Hansson, 2024). While multimedia features in messages (e.g., the use of photos, videos) were generally predictive of higher content engagement in the early days of social media, it has often been associated with less engagement in the context of more recent studies of government messages (DePaula et al., 2022; Huang et al., 2022).

2.5. Effects

Effects-focused studies are interested in the organizational and societal outcomes of government social media activity, such as how citizens' use of government social media may affect public trust in government, or how social media may improve the internal workings of the agencies.

There is evidence that when people use government social media, they may perceive the government as more trustworthy (Mansoor, 2021; Porumbescu, 2016; Song & Lee, 2016; Yuan et al., 2023). During emergencies such as the Covid-19 pandemic, the engagement with government social media accounts may increase (Lovari, 2020) as it could fill a void for the need for health and safety information and support measures of self-efficacy and response-efficacy (Tang et al., 2021). The public can help retransmit (share) government social media messages across social media networks, which can be helpful in emergency situations (Hagen et al., 2018). However, government social media messages during a crisis may also induce fear in the public (Lerouge et al., 2023).

The emergence of social media was first welcomed by scholars as potential anti-corruption tools and means to improve democracy and citizen engagement with government (Bertot et al., 2010; Mergel, 2013). While government social media accounts have been used by agency staff to answer user comments and questions, there are several limitations regarding the extent to which social media use can improve government accountability and civic engagement, including the profit motive of social media companies (Feeney & Porumbescu, 2021) and the difficulty of engaging in conversations with thousands and millions of followers (Lindsey et al., 2018). Ultimately, social media has been mainly adopted for information dissemination purposes rather than for citizen engagement (Lee & VanDyke, 2015; Medaglia & Zheng, 2017). Social media

use may also have little effect on internal organizational processes, such as organizational culture and communication (Roengtam et al., 2017).

Methods for studying the effects of government social media use include surveys and regression modeling (e.g., Song & Lee, 2016; Tang et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2023) as well as interviews with government social media staff (Levenshus, 2016).

3. Domains of Government Social Media Communication

Governments formulate and implement policies in various domains, such as the economy, education, health, and so on. We suggest that studies into government social media communication may be categorized based on which policy domains they address. In this section, we outline some policy domains that have received more attention in existing academic literature.

3.1. Health and Safety

Preventing harm and keeping people safe and healthy is one of the core tasks of government. Researchers of risk, health, and crisis communication and crisis informatics (Guidry et al., 2023; Hagen et al., 2018; Reuter et al., 2018; Reuter & Kaufhold, 2018) have documented the adoption of social media in emergency and disaster risk management for various purposes, generally showing how authorities use social media to (a) warn the public about hazards, such as floods and wildfires, (b) provide guidelines on how to avoid accidents and behave during emergencies, and (c) support coordination between agencies (e.g., Houston et al., 2015; Vos et al., 2018; Wukich, 2016). Institutional social media practices that may help reduce disaster vulnerability include the sharing of educational materials concerning hazards, the monitoring of citizens' concerns during crisis events, the identification of missing persons, and the recruitment and organizing of volunteers who could help people during crises (Torpan et al., 2024).

During disasters and health crises, such as a pandemic, people may be exposed to false and harmful information on social media that may lead them to make poor decisions that put their lives at risk (Hansson et al., 2020, 2021). Therefore, governments may develop communication practices that help to reduce the spread and harmful effects of misinformation to keep people safe (Lovari, 2020; Torpan et al., 2021).

3.2. Law Enforcement

Social media has been adopted in criminology and policing (Ralph et al., 2024). Police communication on social media may serve a variety of purposes, including informing the public about problems (e.g., major road accidents), issuing warnings of immediate threats (e.g., a terrorist alert), advising people (e.g., regarding crime prevention and data security), appealing for help (e.g., in seeking a criminal suspect or missing person), recruiting new police officers, and publicizing police initiatives and successes (Babic & Simpson, 2024; Fielding, 2023; Jungblut et al., 2024; B. Ross et al., 2018). Police may also use digital platforms to carry out targeted influence campaigns for crime prevention (Horgan et al., 2025) and conduct online surveillance to gather information about crimes, suspects, and victims (Walsh & O'Connor, 2019). Police agencies may use social media communication to enforce border security (Walsh, 2020), including using online campaigns as instruments to control immigration (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2020).

It has been observed that social media use may "de-bureaucratize" police communication, as police organizations may communicate both through organizational and personal identities and adopt a more informal approach to public messaging (Meijer & Torenvlied, 2016; Rasmussen, 2021). While social media communication could, in principle, facilitate citizen participation in public policing and increase public trust and confidence in the police (Grimmelikhuijsen & Meijer, 2015; Ralph, 2022), police departments may actually struggle to engage in interaction with citizens online (Bullock, 2018; Crump, 2011) and need to overcome various structural and cultural barriers to improve their practices (Dekker et al., 2020; Ralph & Robinson, 2023).

3.3. Foreign Policy

A growing body of literature explores how governments try to engage and persuade foreign audiences via social media. Researchers have traced the "digitalization of public diplomacy," that is, the process of ministries of foreign affairs and diplomats learning to deploy social media tools to narrate their nation's foreign policy, launch digital media campaigns to "sell" particular international deals to foreign citizens, manage national and personal brands online, and open virtual embassies to overcome the limitations of traditional diplomacy (Bjola & Manor, 2024; Manor, 2019). Importantly, governments may also use social media to build domestic support for their foreign policy (Bjola & Manor, 2018).

Ministries of foreign affairs have become central actors that craft and disseminate messages globally via social media (Danziger & Schreiber, 2021; Manor & Segev, 2023) and use both text and images strategically to frame conflicts and wars in ways that help to legitimize their policies (Manor & Crilley, 2018).

Many researchers are increasingly concerned with the rise of "computational propaganda" (Bradshaw & Howard, 2018) and disinformation spread internationally by governments of authoritarian states, such as Russia (Freelon & Lokot, 2020; Nissen, 2015; Soares et al., 2023). For example, as part of its hostile foreign influence operations, the Russian government has been shown to employ automated agents—bots—on digital platforms to disseminate false narratives that serve the interests of President Vladimir Putin's regime and harm Western democracies (Dawson & Innes, 2019; Doroshenko & Lukito, 2021; Marigliano et al., 2024). The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs also uses its social media profiles to make uncivil and aggressive statements and offend Western policymakers and diplomats (Hansson, 2024; Massa & Anzera, 2024).

3.4. Military

Governments are responsible for defending the nation against hostile and aggressive external actors and, when needed, deploying armed forces. Within military studies, social media communication has been researched under the monikers of "cyber warfare" and "information warfare." This research shows how social media tools may be "weaponized" for the purposes of attacking an enemy or defending one's population (Nissen, 2015; Prier, 2020; Singer & Brooking, 2018) as well as for cyberespionage (Bossetta, 2018).

Several studies have explored how soldiers represent war in their social media posts (e.g., Desoutter, 2025; Shim & Stengel, 2017). The use of social media by individual military professionals may pose security risks and governments have enforced social media policies/strategies to regulate their use (Hellman et al., 2016;

Lawson, 2014). Military personnel are also receiving new media literacy training to recognize disinformation on social media and build resilience against hostile foreign influence operations (Ventsel et al., 2024).

4. Future Directions

The review above shows that government social media communication research should be regarded as a multidisciplinary endeavor that combines theoretical insights and analytical approaches from different fields. Approaches from political science, public administration, and sociology can improve our understanding of the political, institutional, and cultural contexts where governments and citizens use social media, as well as the broader societal effects of social media communication. Approaches from linguistics and (multimodal) discourse studies can provide a more fine-grained picture of the content of government social media messaging as well as public responses to official messages. Approaches from media and information technology research help to create new knowledge about the affordances and usage patterns of communication platforms as well as the related risks, such as algorithmic manipulation and privacy concerns.

While the early studies mainly charted the overall social media adoption in government (and many still do as new platforms emerge and gain traction), later work has more often focused on the specific functions and content of government social media profiles. As of yet, relatively little has been written about the ways in which the public engages with governments online (beyond "following," "liking," and "sharing") and the organizational and societal outcomes of their social media activity.

Importantly, the heuristic categories used in this review to organize the literature on government social media communication are not mutually exclusive. The proposed classification reflects significant areas of emphasis within particular pieces of research, but admittedly, a single study may address several research questions, apply mixed methods, and thus fall under multiple categories. For instance, researchers may look at both message design and audience engagement (e.g., DePaula et al., 2022; Page & Hansson, 2024) or explore the possible societal effects of audience behavior (e.g., Hagen et al., 2018). Future research might benefit from assembling multidisciplinary research teams and systematically combining more foci, for example, to explore the links between specific contexts of social media use, message content, and its effects within several policy domains.

Notably, if a study focuses on a particular sender, this tends to determine the policy domain of the study because each government agency and officeholder is tasked with developing or implementing policies within specific domains. Our review suggests that significant academic attention has been paid to government social media use within policy domains concerning health and safety, public order, and national security. There are other major domains of government policy the communication of which deserve further study, such as economics (concerning, for instance, fiscal and monetary policy, taxation, trade, regulation of businesses), social welfare (e.g., social security, welfare programs, poverty reduction, housing assistance), education (e.g., funding for schools, special education, vocational training), transportation (e.g., public transportation, traffic management), energy (e.g., renewable energy, energy efficiency), and environment (e.g., climate change). Future research could produce comparative studies of social media communication in different policy domains to facilitate the diffusion of good practices and lessons learned. Moreover, diachronic studies could detect shifts or trends in social media communication over time along each research focus and within various policy domains.

A cross-cutting issue for future research within all policy domains is how government communication on social media could better support deliberative politics, that is, democratic decision-making that involves mutual respect between participants in argumentation who seek to reach mutual understanding (Habermas, 2023). Methods of dialogic analysis (e.g., Page & Hansson, 2024) could be applied to study how people respond to government messages and how governments interact with citizens in a variety of contexts and on various topics. Moreover, there is little research on what government communication means to different groups in society and how it could improve their lives.

While social media have been discussed as technologies of democratization, they are also often associated with promotional culture and misinformation (Harsin, 2018) and even the rise of political polarization and authoritarianism (e.g., Kubin & von Sikorski, 2021; Pearce & Kendzior, 2012). There is a widespread concern that social media platforms play a role in democratic backsliding as they algorithmically amplify disinformation and extremist content (Bennett & Livingston, 2025). While government agencies have been interested in tackling false information in society, especially in health and safety contexts (e.g., Lovari, 2020; Torpan et al., 2021; Vraga & Bode, 2017), there are also concerns about governments in democratic countries spreading disinformation themselves (e.g., Pentney, 2022; A. S. Ross & Rivers, 2018). Future research could further explore the causes and forms of government misinformation on social media and its effect on public trust in government.

Politicization of government agencies—that is, officeholders moving away from their mission of serving the public interest and getting involved in party-political messaging—may have a negative impact on their social media communication practices (DePaula & Hansson, 2025; Zhou et al., 2023). Comparative and diachronic studies are needed to better understand the administrative and political factors of politicization, how agency politicization is manifested on different media platforms, and what its effects are on different audiences and, more broadly, on the quality of democratic debates in society.

Governments need social media platforms to capture people's attention, but governments also try to regulate platform companies that have become extremely powerful actors in society (Nielsen & Ganter, 2022). As social media companies gain more political power and create greater restrictions on data access, it complicates the work of government communication scholars and undermines the democratic potential of social media communication. Therefore, the study of media and information policy (including the ways to increase data transparency) remains especially relevant to the field of government communication research.

Governments have started to integrate chatbots (and other so-called artificial intelligence or machine learning tools) into their online public communication workflows, which may eliminate human roles, reduce interpersonal interactions, and transform citizen-government communication in multiple ways (Androutsopoulou et al., 2019; T. Chen & Gasco-Hernandez, 2024; T. Chen et al., 2024; Kaun & Männiste, 2025). As this is a novel and rapidly developing technology, the practices and broader societal and political effects of automated social media communication deserve critical scholarly scrutiny in the coming years.

Conflict of Interests

No conflict of interest to declare. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University, Finland).

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10457
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10457

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Open Access Journal

Normalizing Government Social Media Communication: A Swedish Case Analysis

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Submitted: 31 March 2025 **Accepted:** 20 August 2025 **Published:** 18 September 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

Social media is transforming how political power is exercised through communication, functioning both as a critical resource and as a catalyst for institutional adaptation in executive government. This article examines how social media is integrated into government communication, distinguishing between two dimensions: structure and process. Drawing on a literature review and a case study of Sweden—based on interviews with government press secretaries/media advisers and analysis of official documents—we develop a theoretical logic in which resources act as a causal mechanism driving the normalization of social media. We conceptualize this process as operating through two pathways: adaptation to new communicative requirements and the combination of different media, here termed strategic complementarity. The findings show that social media has become an embedded element of government communication, steadily reshaping routines, professional roles, and the balance between traditional and digital channels. This study contributes to understanding how governments manage hybrid media environments and highlights the underexplored role of social media as a potential driver of power redistribution.

Keywords

digitalization; government communication; hybrid media; institutional adaptation; national governance; normalization of social media; power resource; press secretaries; strategic complementarity; Sweden

1. Introduction

A substantial body of research has examined social media in political contexts, focusing on its role as a campaign tool, a policy instrument, or a storytelling platform, and on its use by politicians and organizations.

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Existing studies document the growing importance of social media for political actors and institutions including the wider public sector. The appeal of social media has often been linked to its distinctive affordances—its technological and communicative properties (e.g., Daniel & Obholzer, 2025; Larsson et al., 2025; Stier et al., 2018). However, most of this research centres on election campaigning. By contrast, far less is known about the use of social media in national government communication—its structures, processes, practices, and strategies. This leaves a significant gap in our understanding of how governments adapt to *digital media logics*—the technological and communicative norms specific to digital platforms. This article addresses part of that gap, contributing to the literature on political/government communication and national governance by examining governmental adaptation to digital media. Our guiding question is: How can we account for governments' normalization of social media?

We approach this question by theorizing government communication on social media, developing a conceptualization that reflects the unique characteristics of social media, its widespread adoption, and its integration into governance. Sweden serves as our case study. Digitalization is a stated priority in the methods and processes of national governance, with extensive use of digital communication channels (Government Offices of Sweden, 2025a, 2025b). This reflects a broader global pattern in which governments expand and strategically instrumentalize social media for both internal and external communication. We suggest that adoption and normalization of social media in government communication are shaped by two key components: structure and process. Applying a structure–process framework, our study examines these elements using novel data from interviews and official documents. We find that social media has become normalized in government communication, driven by the evolving media landscape, the proliferation of platforms, and the diversity of audiences—creating strong incentives for governments to diversify their communication channels.

Government communication necessarily engages with multiple media logics from long-standing relationships with institutionalized news media to the distinct dynamics of digital platforms. In this article, "conventional," "editorial," and "news media" are used interchangeably to denote institutionally embedded formats—whether print or broadcast, analogue or digital. The term digital media is used when emphasizing the technological or infrastructural dimension, encompassing formats ranging from official government websites and databases to commercially operated platforms. Social media, a subset of digital media, refers to commercially operated platforms such as X (formerly Twitter), Facebook, and Instagram, which operate under distinctive logics of connectivity, personalization, and data extraction. We differentiate social media analytically due to these logics, affordances, and communicative dynamics. While media convergence blurs boundaries, important differences persist in format, institutional structure, communicative function, and symbolic positioning.

In this study, normalization is treated as equivalent to institutionalization—the embedding of formal and informal norms, rules, and procedures into organizational routines. Institutionalization manifests both formally (e.g., in the structure of government organizations) and informally (e.g., in evolving communication practices). Our contribution lies not in redefining normalization, but in applying it to the context of central government communication within a hybrid media environment, framing it through the lens of strategic complementarity and with attention to institutional change and governance logics.

The article proceeds as follows. First, we establish a conceptual framework by reviewing the relevant literature. Second, we outline our theoretical argument for why social media can be expected to be

normalized in government communication. Third, we describe the methods and data used. Fourth, we present our case study of the normalization of social media in Sweden. Finally, we conclude with a summary of the findings and directions for future research.

2. Conceptual Framework

This section develops the conceptual foundation for the study by synthesizing two key ideas from the literature: the normalization of social media in government communication and the notion of strategic complementarity between different media types. We also introduce an analytical lens that distinguishes between structure and process. Together, these strands inform our conceptual framework which situates dimensions of government communication within a broader media–institutional environment.

2.1. Social Media, Structure, and Process in Government Communication

Building on the structure–process framework introduced in Section 1, this article joins other contributions on government communication at the central executive level (particularly Canel & Sanders, 2014, 2016; Sanders, 2020; Sanders & Canel, 2013). The framework for government communication analysis developed by Canel and Sanders (2013, pp. 14–16) distinguishes between structure and process. Structural elements relate to two administrative organizational dimensions: formal rules, including organizational charts specifying communication roles as well as all relevant legislation, policies, and guidance; and financial resources, including budgets and reward systems. Human resources constitute a separate structural element and include the skills, knowledge, and values of the communication workforce. Process relates to information gathering and analysis (e.g., coordination and planning mechanisms and routines), dissemination (briefings, meetings, press conferences, digital media, campaigns, and advertising), and evaluation.

Like other organizations, governments make use of different forms of media, including traditional news media and social media. Communication functions include work related to digital platforms, and greater reliance on social media means more platform-specific communication work. As Karlsen and Kolltveit (2023, p. 381) conclude, communication on social media requires nuanced attention to the "imagined" audience and, therefore, for political actors and ministerial media advisers in particular, "integrated knowledge about media logic, political logic, political strategy logic, and social media logic is essential." They call for research into how social media has affected the background, formal status, and tasks of ministerial media advisers, and whether social media skills have become a major criterion when selecting them (Karlsen & Kolltveit, 2023, p. 386).

Regardless of the policy area, government communication is essentially political, and governments instrumentalize social media for political purposes. Social media platforms have become embedded in government communication practices. At the same time, these platforms operate within broader digital infrastructures that shape public communication, institutional dynamics, and governance. Platforms—understood as systems enabling interaction between users and organizing communication through proprietary algorithms—do not all function equally in political contexts. Some, like X, play a disproportionately influential role due to their real-time dynamics and elite user networks.

Government social media communication can be differentiated into domains such as message types or adoption factors. Much of it has proven to be for informational, presentational, and symbolic purposes, as

evidenced in research on local government social media communication (e.g., DePaula et al., 2018; Ravenda et al., 2022; Silva et al., 2017). Social media usage by governments has developed into an increasingly prominent theme of research, with particular attention paid to local government and the wider public sector (e.g., Faber et al., 2020; Lovari & Valentini, 2020; Villodre et al., 2021; Wukich, 2021; Yavetz & Aharony, 2020; Zheng & Zheng, 2014).

Numerous studies demonstrate ubiquitous social media use in the public sector and advance understanding of social media adoption and its purposes, including the promotion of government initiatives. This adoption is often described as a process of adaptation to new technological environments, and in parts of the literature, it is further examined through the lens of institutionalization (e.g., Criado & Villodre, 2022; Figenschou, 2020; Mabillard et al., 2022; Mergel, 2016; Olsson & Eriksson, 2016). Distinct social media repertoires have emerged in a wide range of countries, changing professional practices. The literature consistently shows that, once adopted, social media practices are gradually normalized and institutionalized, becoming integral to both political strategy and administrative communication routines.

2.2. Strategic Complementarity and Normalization

A further conceptual pillar of our framework is strategic complementarity—the mutually reinforcing integration of traditional and digital platforms in communicative practices—linked to broader patterns of media convergence (Castells, 2009; Jenkins, 2006). This concept captures not only the diversity of media types but also the interactions and mutual influences across them. Newer media learn or borrow from older ones, and vice versa, in a continuous process of "remediation" (Bolter & Grusin, 2000) where any medium can be reshaped amid general media convergence.

In the age of hybrid media, politics is increasingly defined by actors able to blend older and newer media (Chadwick, 2011, 2017; Chadwick et al., 2018). The internet has created a new political opportunity structure linked to multiple media platforms. Political actors strategically distribute content across both traditional and social media to maximize visibility, amplify reach, and increase message impact—leveraging both journalistic attention and social media virality.

This development is well documented in research inspired by the hybrid media system approach, including studies from Sweden (Ekman & Widholm, 2024; Klinger & Svensson, 2015), Denmark (Blach-Ørsten et al., 2017; Severin-Nielsen, 2023, 2024; Severin-Nielsen et al., 2025), and Norway, where Karlsen and Enjolras (2016, p. 338) find that "the candidates who gain influence in social media are those who are able to create a synergy between traditional media channels and social media." These contributions highlight the interactivity and interdependency in politics–media relations, showing how hybridization changes the way political actors and structures conduct politics.

Strategic complementarity means that content circulates across platforms and outlets, forming hybridized patterns of government communication. Political actors have much to gain from this approach, especially as audiences migrate online and consume more news digitally. As Daniel and Obholzer (2025, p. 1) note: "Politicians have a rational incentive to keep up with voters' growing use of social media platforms. How they do so is important for democratic political communication."

Social media enables political actors to engage directly with the public and bypass conventional media, sharing unedited content that can drive traditional news coverage. This is evidenced in research on online political news coverage and the journalistic practice of embedding social media posts—especially tweets—in news articles (Oschatz et al., 2022; see also Kapidzic et al., 2022; López-Rabadán & Mellado, 2019). Social media is also a news source for newspapers and conventional media (e.g., Gioltzidou et al., 2024; Ren et al., 2022; Tewodros, 2024). Content flows in both directions: discussions starting on social media are picked up by traditional media, and broadcast content often triggers social media responses.

Normalization is closely linked to hybridity and complementarity across media. We draw here on media and journalism research, including the widely cited work of Margolis and Resnick (2000) on the "normalization of cyberspace," the idea that while the internet can be transformative, it does not exist apart from existing political and media structures (see also Davis, 2009). Governments enter online spaces to pursue political goals, influence offline political activities, and reach voters.

Reflecting the evolving nature of "cyberspace" and media technologies, research has examined how online campaigning and specific platforms such as X and Instagram have been normalized (Koc-Michalska et al., 2016; Lasorsa et al., 2012; Molyneux & Mourão, 2017; Perreault & Hanusch, 2024; see also Perreault et al., 2025). These studies show how the routine use of platforms becomes embedded in journalistic practice, with norms from older platforms transferred to new ones. This adaptation and integration of technological innovations into routines and practices is central to the normalization process.

Normalization may be partly an unintended adaptation, but it can also be a deliberate strategy, as political actors seek to capitalize on platforms for political advantage. Beyond efficiency and reach, social media reshapes the timing and rhythm of political communication, enabling real-time responses and agenda-setting independent of traditional media cycles.

The central elements of structure and process linked to strategic complementarity and normalization are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Conceptual framework: Elements of structure and process, linked to normalization and strategic complementarity.

Dimension	Elements [1]	Link to normalization	Link to strategic complementarity
Structure	Formal rules, organizational charts, regulations, budgets, and human resources	Embedding social media into formal roles, regulations, and staffing norms	Integrating social media capacity into the existing communication infrastructure
Process	Information gathering, coordination, and information dissemination and evaluation	Making social media part of everyday routines and practices	Combining platform-specific dissemination with conventional media cycles

Source: [1] Adapted from Canel and Sanders (2013).

3. Core Theoretical Argument

Governments generally may be expected to be drawn to digital media and social media platforms. But what exactly is it about social media that gives it the ability to shape government organizations' communications? Why is it that social media is normalized in government communication?

Building on, but also moving beyond, the existing body of research, we claim that the combined social media effect on government communication operates through two interconnected mechanisms: adaptation and strategic complementarity—the deliberate combination of different kinds of media. We conceptualize this as the strategic use of hybrid media logics where political actors navigate and combine the affordances of both legacy and social media. Importantly, we do not emphasize convergence as technological or institutional fusion, but rather the calculated blending of formats, audiences, and distribution logics. In the process, the executive undergoes a shift towards normalization, as social media becomes embedded in daily routine.

This normalization is shaped by actors' perceptions of the potential gains offered by emerging digital technologies. The trend of integrating social media platforms into government communication is closely linked to political parties' and governments' interest in participating in online spaces. Our theory assumes that government communication is driven by incentives to maintain and enhance capacity and capability. Digital developments have benefited politicians not only by offering new spaces for communication, but also by generating resources in their favour.

Online communication on social media is a key resource for organizations and politicians, whether in or out of government. It is both a symbolic or immaterial resource, related to public image, and a material resource, linked to technological and economic factors (e.g., Criado & Villodre, 2022; Figenschou, 2020; Jost, 2023). The adoption of social media affects not only the content and style of communication, but also how influence and authority are exercised within executive structures. These dynamics blur the boundaries between internal and external communication, challenge traditional information control, and necessitate new routines for coherence and coordination.

Therefore, the rise and usage of social media platforms offer not just an organizational resource but also a power and leadership resource, like the media in general. This causal mechanism involves the adaptation of procedures and practices to the functional requirements of online communication, with implications for the distribution of power within the executive system and for the balance of power between government and media. We will return to these implications in the concluding section.

Our theoretical argument is grounded in an extensive literature review and in observed interdependencies—both offline and online—between politics and media, and across different media types. The integration of social media into government communication is not merely a byproduct of digitalization; it is the outcome of deliberate institutional adaptation to changing media logics and to new forms of public interaction in a context of informational competition and an evolving media environment. It reflects the government's strategic capacity to respond to changes in its environment, that is, its capacity for strategic management.

If the theoretical model proposed here accurately reflects these mechanisms, we should expect to see similar patterns of strategic normalization of government social media communication across national contexts. Resource availability—symbolic, technological, and economic—is a central part of the normalization process.

4. Method and Data

We explore our argument through a case study of the effects of social media on national-level government communication in Sweden. Guided by the ambition to theoretically and empirically map social media normalization in government communication, we selected organizations and institutions in Sweden's central executive. Sweden's combination of a stable media system, high internet penetration, and strong public institutions makes it a particularly informative case for examining how social media is integrated into government communication in a consolidated democracy. Traditionally, Sweden belongs to a group of countries characterized by strong and stable media systems, robust commercial and public service media organizations, high journalistic professionalism, and broad news reach (Nord & Grusell, 2021; Wadbring & Karlsson, 2024).

Our empirical base combines secondary and primary sources. The secondary literature, previous research on Sweden's executive communication, provides essential context, drawing on extensive empirical studies of the Swedish executive system and particularly its communication functions. The primary contribution of this study rests on novel data collected through interviews and official government documents.

The interview material consists of 13 interviews with government press secretaries or senior media advisers based either in line ministries or in the prime minister's office. The study covers three political periods: the centre–right governments from 2006 to 2014 and from 2022, the social democratic–green governments from 2014 to 2021, and the social democratic government from 2021 to 2022. All but one interview were conducted face-to-face; one was held by phone. The interviews addressed day-to-day routines, evolving relationships with journalists, and the role of social media in official messaging. A separate set of questions focused on the professional use of specific platforms (e.g., Facebook, X, Instagram, and various blogs)—how they were used and for what purposes. The interviews provide a basis for identifying general tendencies and developmental patterns, with individual quotations used to illustrate either common views or particularly clear points.

In parallel, we collected parliamentary and government documents on communication including regulations, staffing guidelines, and procedural instructions. The communications policy has been updated in response to the challenges of digitalization and the documentary material is valuable for understanding the formal structure of government communication and the regulatory framework for social media use.

Taken together, the combination of interview data and official documents enables us to examine both the formal, regulatory aspects and the informal, practice-based dimensions of social media use in central government communication. This dual perspective allows us to trace how institutional frameworks interact with everyday communication routines, shaping the normalization of social media in the Swedish executive.

5. Case Study: Normalizing Government Social Media Communication in Sweden

Having outlined our conceptual framework and theoretical argument, we now turn to the Swedish case to examine how social media normalization manifests in practice. In Sweden, as in many other democracies, social media has become increasingly embedded within government communication, reflecting broader changes in the media landscape and institutional practices. Two overarching trends frame this development.

The first trend is the changing media environment. Sweden combines high internet penetration with a rapidly evolving media usage profile. A growing share of the population regularly uses social media platforms, and more people—especially the youth—get political information from sources other than mainstream news media, including influencers. Traditional broadcast and print media have adapted to platform environments, shifting towards multiplatform production (Wadbring & Karlsson, 2024). While an increasing number of Swedes use social networking services compared to radio or newspapers, conventional news media—press, radio, and television—remain important (Ohlsson, 2025). Swedish radio and television continue to enjoy the highest levels of public trust (Kuylenstierna, 2025). Political news reporting has shown remarkable stability, partly due to the inertia of journalism as a path-dependent institution (Strömbäck, 2025). Nevertheless, social media has changed the communication of political parties and politicians. It plays a more central role in parties' election campaigning, but has not replaced conventional media as the primary communication channel. Research consistently shows that, in Sweden, social media supplements rather than replaces conventional media in political communication (Bolin & Falasca, 2019; Bolin et al., 2022; Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2019; Nord & Grusell, 2021).

In parallel, we identify a second trend of organizational adaptation in the executive. The Swedish executive has adapted structurally and procedurally to meet the functional demands of a hybrid media environment. The government has strengthened coordination of policy and communication, restructured towards greater centralization, and expanded resources dedicated to communications—particularly through the appointment of more press secretaries (Brinde et al., 2022; K. M. Johansson, 2022; K. M. Johansson & Raunio, 2020; Salomonsen et al., 2025). These developments reflect both the pressures of media adaptation and the drive to modernize government operations through digitalization.

Our empirical analysis focuses on structure and process, following the conceptualization outlined above, to assess how social media has been normalized within the Swedish central executive and what organizational implications this has produced.

5.1. Structure

In this subsection, we will discuss organizational reforms and resource allocation, regulatory framework, and role ambiguity, as well as professional norms and coordination challenges.

On 1 January 2020, the ministries' communication activities were integrated into a joint communications department to increase uniformity across ministries. A further reorganization in 2024–2025 emphasized digitalization as a means of streamlining communication processes and modernizing operations. The department's focus includes expanding outreach on government policy—particularly via digital platforms and AI technologies. A digitalization strategy adopted in 2024 guides ongoing development of working methods and processes supported by digital technology (Government Offices of Sweden, 2025b).

Formal regulation of government communication, including social media, was introduced relatively late and generally codifies existing practice. The overarching regulatory framework is the communication policy document, first introduced in 2012 and last updated in 2024 (Government Offices of Sweden, 2024). A formal social media policy was only adopted in 2016, with revised guidance in 2025 (Government Offices of Sweden, 2025c). These documents distinguish between official accounts managed by government offices

and those maintained by ministers in a personal or party-political capacity. Ambiguity persists over whether ministers' messages are delivered in an official, private, or party capacity. This has drawn scrutiny from the parliamentary Committee on the Constitution, which has warned that use of private or party-affiliated accounts for official communication can blur lines of responsibility and hinder accountability (Swedish Riksdag, 2025).

Beyond formal rules, unwritten professional norms shape communication practices. What press secretaries do is mainly subject to executive self-regulation (E. Johansson & K. M. Johansson, 2022; K. M. Johansson, 2024a, 2024b). And political appointees, including press secretaries, operate in a politicized environment where coordination is critical—especially in coalition governments. Social media intensifies pressures on coherence and increases the importance of intra-executive integration. The government has responded by further resourcing communications and strengthening coordination mechanisms.

5.2. Process

In this part, we focus on day-to-day practices and routines that demonstrate normalization processes in action. Coordination, speed, and platform-specific strategies have become defining features of executive communication.

In regard to communication pace and real-time coordination, the interviews highlight the accelerated pace of media work driven by real-time social media dynamics. Press secretaries often start the day by scanning social media before other media. As one foreign minister's press secretary explained: "It is almost the first thing I do when I wake up, before the radio and TV thing…I wake up, turn off the alarm, scroll through Twitter." A prime minister's press secretary said: "We start texting each other at 6 am." Then it is about the most important thing or things to react to, which can originate from any platform. It usually sets the agenda for the workday.

As indicated in the interviews, press secretaries spend much of the day on social media. Social media is a tool for press secretaries to interact with journalists and others and to stay updated on events (see more in E. Johansson, 2019; E. Johansson & K. M. Johansson, 2022).

Interviews produced examples of communication across media from different governments, showing both continuity and change:

1. Fredrik Reinfeldt era (2006–2014): Press secretaries stressed the unprecedented ability for leaders to communicate directly with the public via social media, bypassing exclusive reliance on conventional media.
2. Stefan Löfven era (2014–2021): Observations about reduced journalistic resources and increased unfiltered news sharing highlighted the strategic use of social media to feed into mainstream coverage.
3. Feminist foreign policy (2014–2022): Coordinated use of both traditional media and platforms like X to promote policy internationally, linking social media posts to high-profile global coverage (e.g., *The New York Times*).
4. Ulf Kristersson era (2022–present): More assertive engagement with journalists via social media, reflecting a fully digital-aware communication style, including commentary on shifts in US media accreditation (e.g., press secretary Tom Samuelsson, X, 12 December 2024, 29 January 2025).

Press secretaries emphasize the need to integrate content creation for both traditional and digital outlets. As one of the prime minister's press secretaries put it:

> I think we see communication as communication, and don't focus so much on dividing our work based on individual channels (traditional/new media). We help produce both written comments for newspapers and tweets, for example. Not infrequently, they are quite like each other. The photos we take may be used in ministers' social media or sent to traditional journalists who publish them.

Digital skills are increasingly central to press secretary recruitment, as reflected in a recent job posting highlighting social media management and video editing as core qualifications (Moderaterna, 2025).

Table 2 provides an overview of the case study evidence.

Table 2. Case study evidence: Structure and process in Sweden's central executive communication.

Category	Key elements observed	Examples from interviews/documents
Structure	Organizational reforms (2020, 2024–2025), centralized communications, social media guidelines (2016, 2025), and resource allocation	Integration of ministries' communications into a joint department, growth in press secretaries, and revised social media guidance distinguishing official/personal accounts
Process	Real-time monitoring, coordination mechanisms, cross-platform content use, and targeted platform strategies	Six AM social media scans, coordinated tweets + traditional op-eds, feminist foreign policy promotion linking X to *The New York Times*, and Kristersson government assertive posts reacting to media coverage

In summary, the Swedish case shows how social media has evolved from a supplementary tool to a normalized component of government communication. Structural reforms, such as centralized communications and expanded resources, have combined with procedural adaptations, such as real-time coordination and platform-specific strategies, to embed social media into the core routines of executive communication. This normalization process has implications for political accountability, public engagement, and institutional transparency—issues to which we return in the concluding discussion.

6. Findings and Future Research

6.1. Findings

This article has shown that social media has become an institutionalized element of government communication—not as a replacement for legacy media, but as a complementary tool strategically integrated into existing practices. The findings represent a conceptual shift. Our study provides evidence that social media platforms are seen as complementary to, rather than a substitute for, conventional media, which continue to offer a sense of stability and normalcy. There is evidence emerging of a government finding adequate measures to cope with as well as to capitalize on the reality of increased media diversity. Diversifying its own communications, with plenty of resources for communications, confers broad benefits on the government. Our analysis contributes to understanding the institutional mechanisms through which social media becomes embedded in government operations—via new roles, routines, regulatory ambiguities,

and inter-media coordination. National governance is being transformed by new ways of working and that is in large part because of digitalization and the instrumentalization of social media; "in the age of digital media and branding" (Marland et al., 2017).

We have traced this dynamic at work through an account of governmental adaptation to social media in Sweden. While many democratic governments have adapted to the evolving media landscape, the Swedish case illustrates how normalization unfolds in a highly institutionalized communication system. This adds nuance to comparative research by highlighting the interplay between centralized governance, public service media traditions, and digital adaptation.

At the same time, there is variation across countries in media and executive systems, in political communication cultures and political-institutional conditions. Notably, the Swedish case may differ from that of countries with less centralized governments, a less established tradition of public service media, or a less developed digital communication infrastructure. These differences highlight the importance of contextual analysis when assessing the broader applicability of our findings.

We also find important ambiguities about the representational status of ministers' online activity: Are they communicating as private individuals, party members, or public office holders? The blending of personal and institutional communication challenges traditional notions of accountability and transparency in politics and government. All of which suggests that we need to pay closer attention to pertinent normative questions about the democratic process.

Taken together, these findings contribute to understanding how social media becomes embedded in governmental communication and governance processes, while also pointing towards unresolved questions that merit more research.

6.2. Future Research

Building on these conclusions, several promising avenues for future research emerge. While our findings clarify how social media becomes embedded in governmental communication, they also reveal important gaps in knowledge about its broader consequences. Addressing these gaps requires situating our results within wider comparative contexts and examining the diversity of political, institutional, and media systems.

First, we need to contextualize effects and explore interactions with other sources of change, to better understand what is driving connectivity between media as well as between government and media in different forms. There is also variation in platforms' affordances, in the ways in which they attract and shape engagement with specific types of audiences—an area where more detailed comparative analysis is needed.

The benefits of social media are well known. Research has consistently shown that social media brings benefits for political actors—giving them opportunities to reach out by directly and easily communicating through platforms, thereby becoming less dependent on mainstream news media. Less understood, however, is social media as a source of power redistribution. Social media may contribute to shifting power dynamics—both within government institutions and between political actors and the media. Understanding who benefits more than others from such redistribution requires further empirical and theoretical inquiry.

The article also generates insights into cross-media links. Given the strategic advantages and complementarity, social media can be expected to become even more important for governments, especially as platform-based digital communication continues to evolve. Besides attention to normative issues, we encourage more interdisciplinary and comparative research for a deeper understanding of the role of social media in government communication, how different media combine, and who benefits most. Government social media adoption and usage are related to power. Social media is a powerful resource—and understanding its implications for democratic governance should remain a priority for the field.

Acknowledgments

The research featured in this article has been partially conducted within a research project funded by the Foundation for Baltic and East European Studies (grant number 1296/3.1.1/2013). We are also grateful to the interviewees for sharing their time and insights. For constructive comments and suggestions, our thanks to the editors and anonymous reviewers of this thematic issue. In addition, we would like to thank Raquel Silva for her editorial guidance.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between Södertörn University and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The data are available from the authors upon reasonable request.

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10416
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10416

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Balancing Acts: The Communicative Roles of Cabinet Ministers on Social Media

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Submitted: 28 March 2025 **Accepted:** 14 July 2025 **Published:** 9 September 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

Despite an upsurge in social media studies, little is known about how cabinet ministers balance their multiple professional roles—as ministry heads, cabinet members, and party politicians—on social media platforms. In this article, we first develop an analytical framework, grounded in the principal–agent theory and earlier research on political communication, that differentiates between cabinet ministers' different communicative roles as well as different communicative purposes on social media. Second, we add to the growing literature on government communication and social media by applying this framework to analyze Norwegian cabinet ministers' social media communication. The data is based on a manual content analysis of 1,062 Facebook posts and an expansion of this data using machine learning to cover all the Facebook communication of all ministers from the Solberg cabinet (2013–2021). Based on almost 20,000 posts, the results indicate that social media caters to ministers' needs both as party politicians and as heads of ministries, as Norwegian cabinet ministers use social media in two key ways: to inform as ministry heads and to brand themselves as party politicians. Further, we find that private self-personalization increases audience engagement. The results suggest that social media accentuates the party-political dimension of the cabinet minister's role, thereby indicating potential consequences for government communication, cabinet unity, and decision-making that warrant further exploration.

Keywords

cabinet ministers; Facebook; government communication; personalization; political communication; political parties; self-personalization; social media

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1. Introduction

In March 2018, the Norwegian minister of justice, Sylvi Listhaug, of the populist Progress Party, resigned from her position following strong criticism of a Facebook meme she had posted. The meme accused the opposition Labor Party of prioritizing the rights of terrorists over national security—a particularly sensitive claim, given that the Labor Party had been targeted in the terrorist attacks on 22 July 2011. The image of masked Al-Shabaab terrorists was accompanied by a caption encouraging followers to "like and share." The post drew widespread condemnation, and the opposition highlighted that a minister of justice should always act as a minister of justice. Even Erna Solberg, the Conservative prime minister, and her coalition partners distanced themselves from Listhaug's remarks. After first refusing to do so, Listhaug eventually apologized in parliament. However, the apology proved to be too little, too late: Listhaug chose to resign before the opposition could initiate a vote of no confidence.

The Listhaug case was a specific scandal that led to a rare ministerial resignation and is, therefore, not representative of ministers' communication on social media in a more general context. However, it illustrates how social media enables politicians to directly communicate with the public, bypassing traditional mass media (Chadwick, 2013; Kreiss et al., 2018; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013). While such bypassing has gained much attention in the research literature, the Listhaug case also highlights a challenge for cabinet ministers that has received less attention: they operate within multiple professional roles that shape their communication. Ministers are expected to act as leaders of their ministries, as public faces of their policy sectors, and as representatives of the government as a whole. At the same time, they remain party politicians, engaging with party leadership, supporters, and core constituencies. These overlapping roles create tensions in ministerial communication, particularly on social media, where role expectations are blurred.

A growing body of literature explores the social media communication and related audience engagement of members of parliament (Metz et al., 2019), party leaders (Magin et al., 2024), and political parties (Russmann et al., 2024). However, the implications of self-personalization on social media for cabinet ministers remain underexplored. In particular, existing research has yet to fully capture how ministers balance their different professional roles—as ministry heads, party politicians, and private persons—and communication purposes—whether to inform, engage, or promote—on social media.

In this article, we make two main contributions to the literature on political communication and social media. First, departing from the common distinction between professional and private self-personalization, we develop an analytical framework based on the principal–agent theory, thereby distinguishing between ministers' different communicative roles (e.g., ministry head, party politician, private person) and purposes (e.g., informing, engaging, promoting) on social media. Second, we apply this framework in a study of Norwegian cabinet ministers' Facebook communication. Specifically, we examine which communicative roles are most frequently adopted by cabinet ministers on social media, how these roles relate to communicative purposes, and how these patterns shape audience reactions. Analyzing audience reactions, such as likes, shares, and comments, enables us not only to provide insights into which roles and purposes resonate with the public but also to have a deeper appreciation of what trade-offs ministers face in navigating these roles.

Manual content analysis of selected ministers' Facebook posts was performed over one year, complemented by an expansion of this data based on machine learning to cover all ministers from the Solberg cabinet (2013–2021). In total, almost 20,000 posts in the eight-year period are included in the analysis.

2. Cabinet Ministers and Social Media

The introduction and increasing importance of social media have given politicians new opportunities in their communicative efforts to address a wide range of different audiences (e.g., Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016; Stier et al., 2018). Before the rise of social media, politicians were at the mercy of journalists when seeking to reach an audience (e.g., Walgrave & Van Aelst, 2006). Social media platforms have enabled politicians to communicate directly with the public, unchecked by traditional mass media (Chadwick, 2013; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013). For politicians, social media communication encompasses, first, the communicative *role* they depart from, and second, the main *purpose* (objective) of the communicative effort. We elaborate on these two aspects below.

2.1. The Communicative Roles of Cabinet Ministers

The opportunities offered by social media are related to the increasing personalization of politics (Karvonen, 2010; Kriesi, 2012). The increased attention on individuals in politics has been a key development in established democracies since the latter half of the 20th century. The personalization of politics involves the processes in which individual leaders are foregrounded and promoted at the expense of collective institutions, such as parties and cabinets (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Rahat & Sheafer, 2007; Van Aelst et al., 2012). Personalization processes have been traditionally linked to media's coverage of politics and both manifested in and reinforced by media logic (Langer & Sagarzazu, 2018). Recently, departing from the affordances of social media, scholars have introduced the concept of self-personalization (Magin et al., 2024; McGregor, 2018; Metz et al., 2019; Russmann et al., 2024). This concept comprises both private and professional dimensions and denotes how politicians themselves engage in personalization through the internet and social media (Metz et al., 2019; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010).

In this article, we build on the distinction between private and professional self-personalization on social media, and we argue that the professional dimensions of politicians' communication on social media are multilayered. By drawing on the concept of role expectations, we suggest that politicians engage in professional communication not only as professionals in a generic sense but as actors navigating multiple, occasionally conflicting, role types. This role-based self-personalization perspective enables a more nuanced and detailed understanding of politicians' self-personalization on social media. The theoretical underpinnings for the multiple roles of cabinet ministers can be found in the principal–agent theory, according to which actors are described as agents acting on behalf of a principal (Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991). Here, parliamentary democracy is considered a chain of delegation and accountability, ranging from voters, parliaments, cabinets, cabinet ministers, to civil servants (Bergman et al., 2000). From this perspective, cabinet ministers first act together with their fellow ministers as collective agents, with the parliament as the principal. Second, cabinet ministers are individual agents with the prime minister, the cabinet, and their own party constituencies as principals. Third, cabinet ministers are principals for the administration they lead (Miller & Müller, 2010). As a result, these configurations can lead to multiple, sometimes competing, role expectations. Self-promotion as a ministry head and champion for a given policy sector

might be important to a cabinet minister, but if they are perceived to be overlooking the party line or their local party base in the process, a future party-political career may be difficult to pursue. Equally, the preferences of the cabinet as a whole (or the prime minister as an individual) may diverge from those of the minister's party. In coalition cabinets comprising several parties, such opposing role expectations are almost inevitable. The principal–agent theory underpins most coalition governance studies, and these various formal roles have been emphasized in previous studies on cabinet ministers:

> [Cabinet ministers] are the legal heads of their respective ministries and thus administrators and specialists. They are generalists by virtue of their membership in the cabinet and their participation in the collective decisions reached in that forum. Finally, they are partisans in the sense that they represent their particular political parties in the cabinet and in their own ministries. (Strøm, 1994, p. 45)

For the purpose of this study, we distinguish between the various roles and, thus, the self-personalization strategies of cabinet ministers as ministry heads, cabinet members, party politicians, individual politicians, and private persons.

2.2. The Communicative Purpose of Political Actors

The second aspect of political actors' social media strategy relates to their communicative aims. Note that although such purposes are arguably closely related to roles, we consider purposes as theoretically and analytically separate from roles. Cabinet ministers can have different aims, objectives, or purposes for their social media communication, regardless of which professional role they assume. Theoretically, from the perspective of the principal–agent theory, the purposes stem from the inherent information asymmetry in the relationship, as agents need to communicate to the principals who hold them accountable for their actions (Gailmard, 2014). As emphasized by Ceron (2024), social media creates new public spaces that can reduce information asymmetries, both by making it easier for agents to disseminate information and for principals to monitor it (thereby reducing both reputation costs and monitoring costs).

Empirically, there is an established body of literature on the social media strategies of presidents, party leaders, and members of parliament. Politicians use social media to broadcast information and communicate with core voters (Bode & Dalrymple, 2015; Small, 2011), to collect information and inputs (DePaula et al., 2018; Grusell & Nord, 2012), to bypass traditional media and set the agenda (Kreiss et al., 2018; Skovsgaard & Van Dalen, 2013), and for branding and reputation management (Ekman & Widholm, 2015; Marland et al., 2017). Certain politicians simply use social media because it has become so commonplace: It is a trend and they have jumped on the bandwagon (Jackson & Lilleker, 2011; Larsson, 2013; Larsson & Kalsnes, 2014). Based on this earlier research, we emphasize "informing" (e.g., providing information regarding policy), "communication" (e.g., encouraging discussion), "mobilizing" (e.g., urging followers to take action), and "branding" (e.g., messages with the objective to portray the ministry, cabinet, or party, politicians, etc. in a positive light) as the essential purposes or objectives for political social media communication. Table 1 sums up the different communicative roles and purposes of politicians' social media use in this study's analytical framework.

Table 1. The communicative roles and purposes of cabinet ministers.

	Communicative purposes			
Communicative roles	Informing	Communicating	Mobilizing	Branding
Ministry head				
Cabinet member				
Party politician				
Individual politician				
Private person				

Previous research suggests that different roles can manifest themselves in communicative practices through which different purposes are emphasized. In their study on campaign communication on social media, Karlsen and Enjolras (2016) identified two key dimensions: a party communicative dimension for creating involvement and mobilizing supporters, and an individualized communicative dimension that focuses on increasing visibility among party colleagues and exhibiting their personal side to different constituencies, including party members and activists, to ensure their future career in the party.

Building on this, certain communicative purposes may be more closely associated with the different communicative roles of cabinet ministers. Principal–agent theory implies that ministers must communicate to demonstrate alignment with the interests of multiple principals, which might entail different types of communicative purposes. As party politicians, they are expected to signal loyalty and dedication to their party leadership and local party base. Simultaneously, in their role as ministry heads, they bear a formal obligation to convey impartial and informative messages to the general public.

Nevertheless, while certain communicative purposes may align more naturally with specific communicative roles, as already stated, we treat roles and purposes as analytically distinct. Their relationship is an empirical question rather than theoretically given. How cabinet ministers' social media activity reflects different communicative roles and purposes is empirically explored below. To guide the analysis, we formulate the following research questions (RQs):

> RQ1: Which communicative roles and purposes are most prevalent in cabinet ministers' Facebook posts?
>
> RQ2: How do the different communicative roles relate to the different communicative purposes?

2.3. Audience Reactions

To capture the interactive dimension of social media communication, we incorporate audience reactions—likes, shares, and comments—into our analytical framework. Social media platforms have a number of opportunities to make audiences engage with content (Moe et al., 2016). The interactive nature of social media enables audiences to provide immediate feedback for published information (Metz et al., 2019). Audience reactions on social media are frequently used as descriptive indicators of reach, popularity, or engagement. Studies typically assume that higher numbers of likes, shares, and comments indicate greater visibility or resonance, and relate this to the types of posts, topics, formats, or platforms (e.g., Metz et al., 2019; Peeters et al., 2022; Russmann et al., 2024; Tønnesen et al., 2023).

Reactions can also be conceptualized as part of a communication loop to understand how politicians interpret and adapt to audience reactions. From a principal–agent perspective, agents pay attention to such feedback due to the reciprocal nature of the information asymmetry. Agents lack knowledge regarding how principals rate their actions (before rewards and punishments are handed out—for example, in elections), and content that leads to reactions will arguably encourage further communication in the same vein. Building on this literature, we treat reactions not only as popularity metrics but also informal signals of resonance with particular role–purpose combinations, thereby enabling us to examine not only which messages gain engagement but also the communicative trade-offs ministers face in their pursuit of attention, legitimacy, and responsiveness. Thus, we formulate a third and final RQ to guide our analysis:

RQ3: Which communicative roles and communicative purposes create most audience engagement?

3. Research Context

Norway is a parliamentary democracy with a multiparty system characterized by strong political parties (Allern et al., 2016). Parties hold a dominant institutional position in the parliament, with high levels of party discipline and centralized control over legislative activity (Narud et al., 2014), and dominate election campaigning (e.g., Karlsen, in press). Consequently, the Norwegian political system is widely regarded as party-centric (e.g., Allern et al., 2016; Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015). However, individual politicians also get a lot of attention in the news media and focus attention on themselves—something that is also true for cabinet ministers (Figenschou et al., 2017; Karlsen & Skogerbø, 2015). Balancing these two considerations, Norwegian politicians across the party spectrum use social media in ways that are both individualized and party-centered (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016).

In the Norwegian cabinet, a cabinet minister heads a given ministry assisted by one political adviser and two to four state secretaries (Askim et al., 2016). It is common to give one of these actors specific media tasks; these actors are responsible for coordinating with the ministerial communication staff, preparing the minister's speeches and media appearances, and advising the minister on the handling of urgent media issues. Across the 16 ministries, communications units have notably expanded over the last two decades—from 50 communication experts in the mid-1990s to approximately 120 in 2016 (Kolltveit, 2016). These communications units sit beneath the ministry's top political and administrative levels, but somewhat adjacent to the standard hierarchical pyramid. The communication experts themselves are civil servants (i.e., they are not politically appointed), and, as with other nonpartisan civil servants, they are expected to act professionally and remain party-politically neutral (Figenschou et al., 2023). As there is no single cabinet spokesperson, communication initiatives are the prerogative of individual ministers and ministries, although the prime minister's office remains informed and lends help when needed. There have been few formal guidelines on social media use in the government (Brekke & Thorbjørnsrud, 2020; Figenschou, 2019). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs became the first ministry to use Facebook in 2009 (Figenschou, 2019); now all ministries and ministers have Facebook accounts. This has resulted in a division of labor, where the communication unit is required to update the ministry's Facebook account, and political advisers are required to update the minister's Facebook account without help from nonpartisan communication experts. However, in reality, some cooperation exists—for example, sharing pictures of the minister.

4. Data

The data used in the content analysis is from the Solberg government, a coalition government led by Prime Minister Erna Solberg from 2013 to 2021. The government was led by the Conservative Party, with three other parties alternating between roles as coalition partners and external support parties during this period. The Solberg government was formed after the September 2013 elections as a minority coalition of the Conservative Party and the Progress Party, with formal support from the Liberal Party and the Christian Democratic Party. The Liberal Party joined the government in January 2018, followed by the Christian Democratic Party in January 2019, thus creating a majority coalition. In January 2020, the Progress Party withdrew from the government but continued to support it in the Storting.

We first performed a qualitative coding of the Facebook accounts of eight ministers' Facebook posts, which were publicly accessible at the time of data collection (autumn 2021), between January 2019 and January 2020. In this period, the government consisted of all four parties. Ministers from the four coalition parties were strategically selected to maintain the gender balance and to ensure that ministers from all parties were represented. All posts in the one-year period were collected using Facebook's tool for researchers, CrowdTangle. All 1,061 posts were manually coded with the help of research assistants. In the manual coding, the research assistants both considered the text of the posts and the associated images to decide the posts' communicative roles and purposes.

The manual coding served as the basis for training a sentence transformer finetuning (SetFit) model (Tunstall et al., 2022) to recognize the roles and purposes in the posts of all the ministers in the Solberg cabinets. In the training of the model, we excluded manually coded posts with images and included the posts that only contained text. It is important to note that most posts with images (n = 6,613) contained text as well. In our dataset, posts with photos contain a mean of over 400 characters of text, which is approximately two-thirds of what posts with only text have (~640), but more than both posts with links (~310) and videos (almost 270). This was necessary because the SetFit model cannot process images and the hand-coding was based on both the images and the text. Thus, training the model on text from posts with images could introduce noise, as the texts do not include everything that served as the basis for the coding. This is a limitation in our data, as images are considered helpful and suitable for conveying self-personalization (particularly to depict private settings; Metz et al., 2019). The trade-off is that with the selected strategy, we could cover far more posts than manual coding made possible. SetFit is a model that fine-tunes sentence transformers to be able to recognize different classes of text. This makes it possible to train models with less annotated data than what was possible earlier (see also Laurer et al., 2024). We used the Norwegian National Library's sentence transformer (NB-SBERT-BASE; Braaten & Kummervold, 2024) and, because our classes are nonexclusive (one post can have multiple roles/purposes), we trained one SetFit model for each class. We utilized 515 of the coded posts, which did not include images, to train each of the models and tested the resulting models on 100 posts. After training the models, we classified the content of the remaining posts from the Solberg government. Overall, the data consists of 18,921 posts.

4.1. Measures

In total, 1,061 posts were first coded according to five roles and four communicative purposes. As mentioned, we treated roles as analytically separate from purposes, although they appear together in the

same posts. As the examples in Table 2 illustrate, the Facebook posts could contain several roles and purposes. The operationalization of roles is based on the analytical framework developed above. Posts coded as "ministry head" were thematically linked to the sector or depicted activities related to their official duties. Posts coded as "cabinet member" focused more on the government as a whole and often included references to decided or implemented policies, occasionally related to policy areas beyond the minister's own portfolio. Posts coded as "party politician" explicitly mentioned the party or its policies. Posts coded as "individual politician" did not indicate any clear party affiliation or ministerial position. Finally, posts coded as "private person" dealt with activities or topics unrelated to the politician's professional role. Further details on role coding are presented in the Supplementary File (Table A2). With regard to communicative purposes, posts coded as "informing" primarily broadcasted factual messages to the public, such as "Today, the cabinet has launched…" Posts coded as "communicating" sought public input or encouraged discussion, often including questions such as "Do you agree?" Posts coded as "mobilizing" urged followers to take action, promoted campaigns, or encouraged engagement through hashtags, likes, and shares. Posts coded as "branding" aimed to portray the ministry, cabinet, or party in a positive light or included negative content regarding political opponents (see Table A3 in the supplementary File for a detailed codebook).

Table 2. Coding examples of communicative combined roles and purpose.

	Role	Purpose	Post content
Example 1	Party politician	Branding and mobilizing	"Very happy that more people will join in the fight for the Progress Party's policies of lower taxes, more roads and fewer tolls. If you agree with us, I hope you will join the team!" Facebook post by Siv Jensen (Progress Party), Minister of Finance
Example 2	Ministry head; cabinet member	Informing and branding	"The government's policy is working! The strong growth in the Norwegian economy is a result of the government's economic policy, according to the IMF. We will continue to build the country and create a sustainable welfare society." Facebook post by Siv Jensen (Progress Party), Minister of Finance

Overall, 20% of the posts were coded with more than one role. This ambiguity could potentially cause coder bias. However, a random 12% sample of the manually coded dataset was manually recoded by a different coder, yielding a high intrarater reliability rating (Cohen's Kappa) of 0.91, which Landis and Koch (1977, p. 165) rate as "almost perfect."

With regard to the machine coding, most of the fine-tuned models reached "moderate" levels when tested against the 100 test posts. We report Kappa, F1, precision, and recall in Table A2 (in the Supplementary File), and the models' performance is comparable to both similar models (Laurer et al., 2024) and more data-intensive models (Widmann & Wich, 2022). The different roles have a Kappa ranging from 0.49 to 0.6 ("moderate"), except for individual politician with a Kappa 0.02 and recall of 7. This role was excluded from the analysis. For purposes, informing and branding only achieved "fair" Kappa values of 0.20 and 0.27 respectively, mobilizing had a "moderate" Kappa value of 0.55, and communicating had an "almost perfect" Kappa value of 0.83. The Kappa values reflect the consistency between manual and machine coding. In addition, we provide figures based only on the manually coded posts (see Supplementary File). As the figures

reveal, the main empirical patterns regarding the roles are mainly the same. However, the discrepancies are more pronounced regarding purposes. Here, the machine coding overestimates the amount of informing and underestimates the amount of branding. This is mainly the case for posts containing images (see Figure A6 in the Supplementary File). Of the machine-coded posts, 9% were not coded as having a purpose by the models. Similarly, 28% of the posts lacked a purpose. We recoded all the posts with images that we had coded but excluded from the training data. For the roles, the Kappa values ranged from 0.61 and 0.54 for ministry head and party politician, respectively, and 0.14 and −0.02 for cabinet minister and private person. For the purposes, the Kappa values were lower, ranging from 0.40, 0.37, 0.29, and 0.00 for communicating, mobilizing, informing, and branding respectively.

In the empirical analysis presented in Section 5 we distinguish between four communicative roles (cabinet member, ministry head, party politician, private person) and four communicative purposes (informing, communicating, mobilizing, and branding).

The corresponding metadata from the Facebook posts was obtained and used to investigate the effect of role and purpose on reactions. To measure consequences in terms of reactions and comments, we used a measure to identify whether a post received more reactions and comments than the average for the politician who authored the post. More precisely, we divided the number of reactions of each post by the mean number of post reactions for that politician. This is expressed in the following formula:

$$\text{Fixed reaction score} = \frac{x}{\sum \frac{x_i}{n}}$$

Here, x is the number of observed reactions on the Facebook post in question, x_i is the number of reactions on the i-th post, and n is the total number of posts for that politician.

We ran ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions with the fixed reaction score as the dependent variable and with the different roles and purposes as the independent variable. In addition, we controlled for the number of characters in the post and for the number of characters squared. We also replicated all analyses using only the manually coded data (see Supplementary File, Figures A1–A4).

5. Results

The empirical analysis is structured based on the RQs and the analytical framework developed in Section 2: First, we investigated communicative roles, then communicative purposes, and then the two combined. Second, we analyzed how communicative roles and purposes relate to social media reactions.

As Figure 1 shows, Norwegian ministers appear to assume two equally important communicative roles in their social media communication. Both the roles of party politician and ministry head are present in almost 35% and a slightly over 40% of the Facebook posts. They communicate less frequently as cabinet members (12%) and private persons (11%). Note that the shares add up to more than 100% because several roles can be present in the same post. These main empirical patterns are similar for the manually coded material (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File).

Figure 2 shows that Norwegian cabinet ministers clearly communicate for different purposes. In the main bulk of analyzed posts, cabinet ministers use Facebook to inform (82%). Moreover, 68% also use social media for

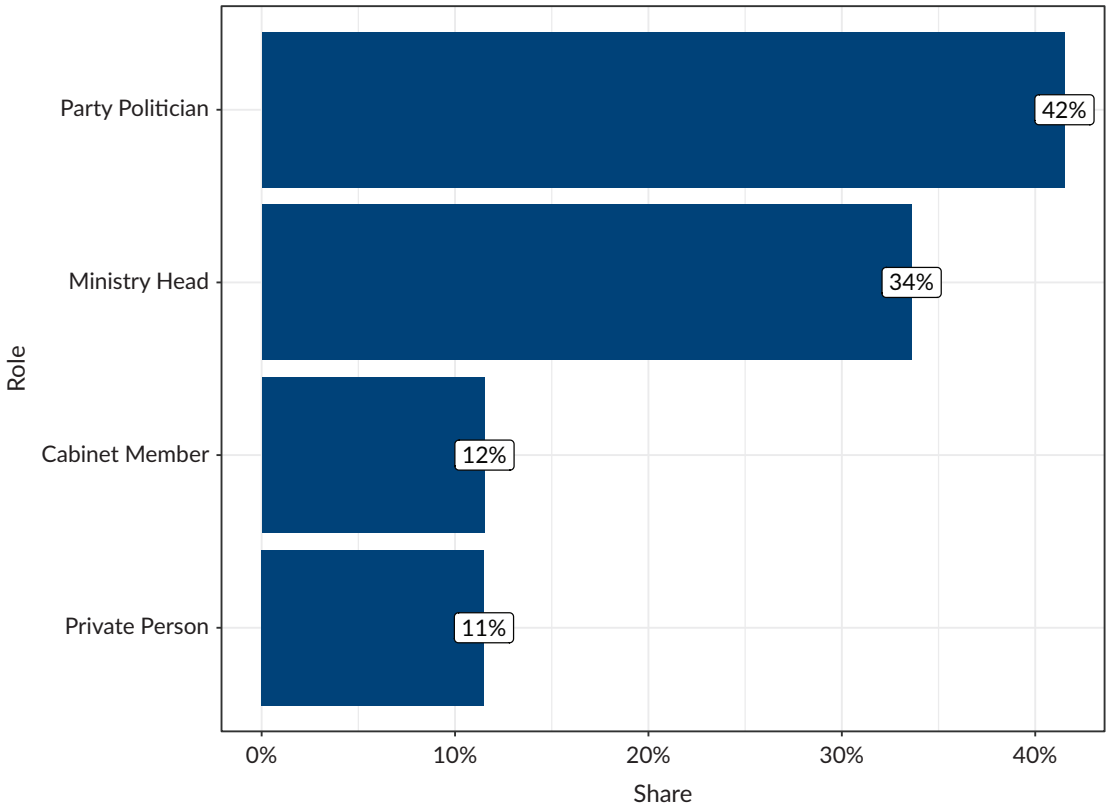


Figure 1. The communicative roles of cabinet ministers on social media: Shares of total posts.

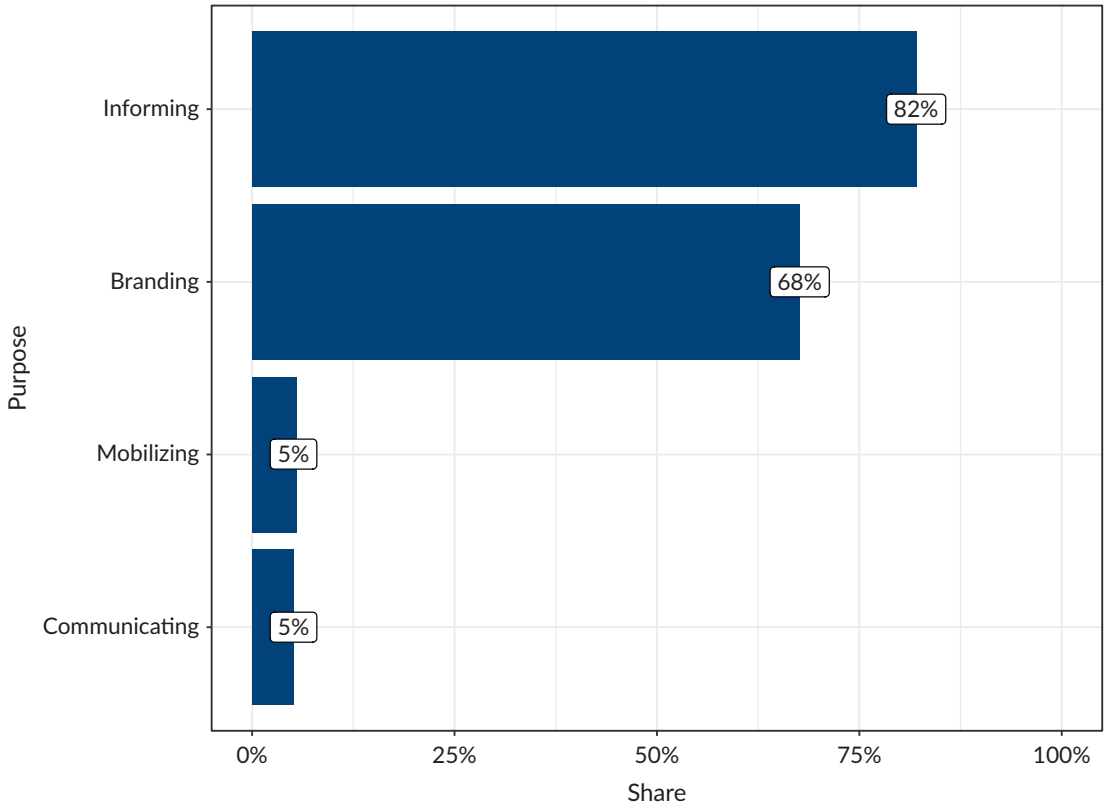


Figure 2. The communicative purposes of cabinet ministers on social media: Shares of total posts.

branding. As evident from Figure 2, the purposes of mobilizing (5%) and communication (5%) are much less prevalent. Here, the empirical patterns deviate somewhat based on manual or machine coding. In the manually coded material, branding is the most common purpose (80% for branding vs. 68% for informing; see Figure A2 in the Supplementary File).

Combining the roles and purposes in Figure 3, it becomes evident how the two are related. Across the three professional roles, informing is most prevalent, ranging from 89% to 98% of the posts. Only as private persons, the purpose of informing is markedly lower (64%). Another clear pattern is that the level of branding greatly varies across roles. When communicating as a ministry head, branding plays a smaller part (67%). However, when acting as a party politician, branding becomes even more prevalent than informing (93% for the former compared to 90% for the latter). Further, the communicative role of a cabinet member follows a similar pattern as that of a ministry head, although branding is somewhat more common in this case (86%). In summary, while

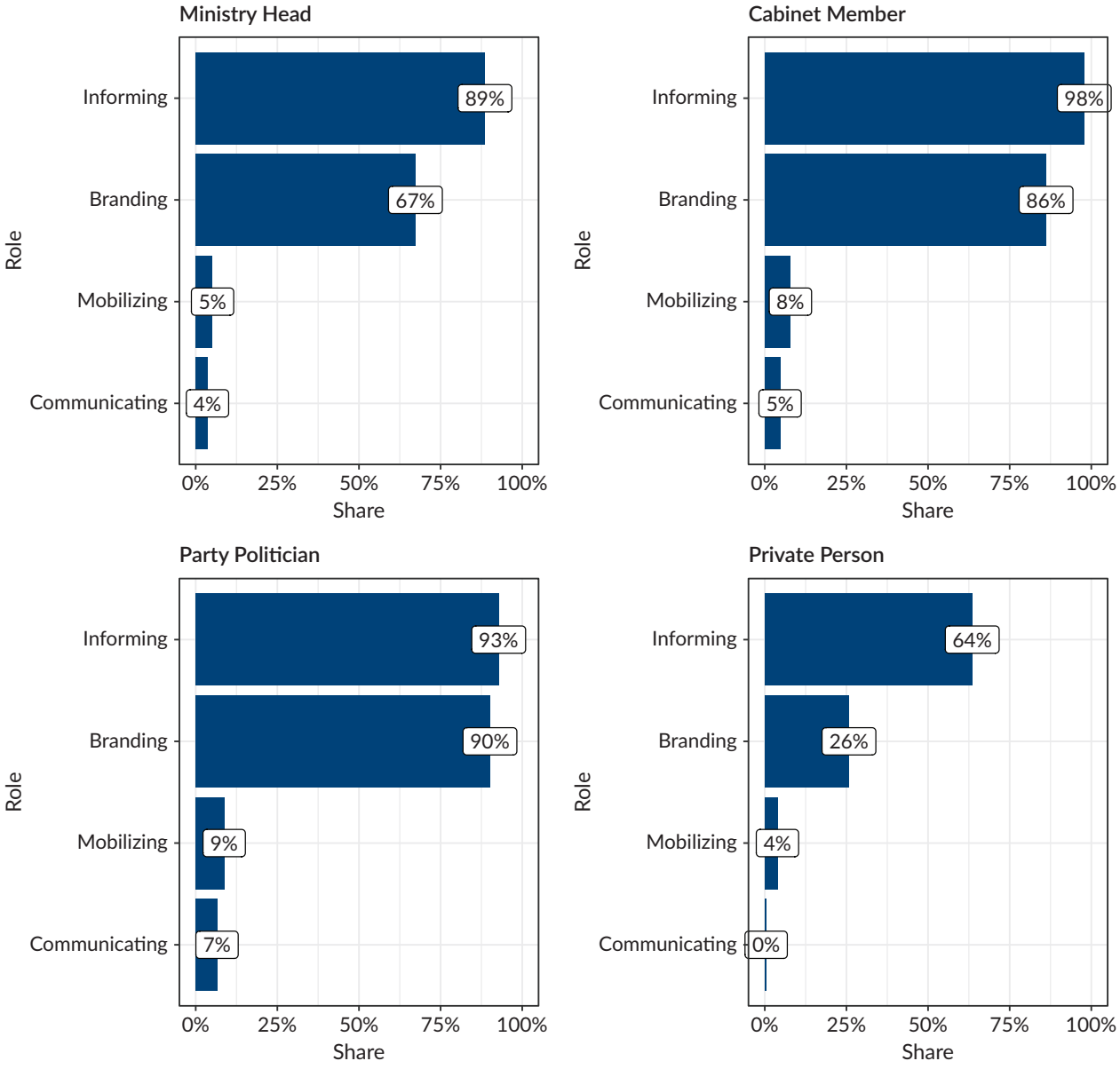


Figure 3. Social media use by communicative role (%).

cabinet ministers primarily use social media for informing across different communicative roles, branding is most strongly associated with their role as party politicians. Moreover, communicating is related more strongly to the role of party politician and cabinet member (9% and 8%, respectively, compared to 4% when appearing as a ministry head). Overall, the different roles appear to be clearly related to the communicative purpose on social media.

Communicative roles and purposes may differ across party lines. Figure 4 displays the percentage of posts associated with each communicative role, grouped by party affiliation. A general pattern emerges: Cabinet ministers across all parties are more likely to adopt the roles of party politician and ministry head compared to private person and member of government. However, a few noteworthy differences exist, particularly in the proportion of posts in the roles of party politician and ministry head. Ministers from the Progress Party are more inclined to adopt the role of party politician and less inclined to adopt the role of ministry head as compared to ministers from other coalition parties. They are also somewhat more likely to assume the role of a member of government. In contrast, Conservative Party ministers more frequently adopt the role of private person. The ministers in the Liberal Party and Christian Democratic Party exhibit similar patterns, generally revealing lower proportions across all roles compared to the ministers in the Progress Party—except in the role of ministry head. The tendency of Progress Party ministers to communicate as party politicians aligns with a common strategy for newly governing parties: to simultaneously present themselves as both in power and in opposition.

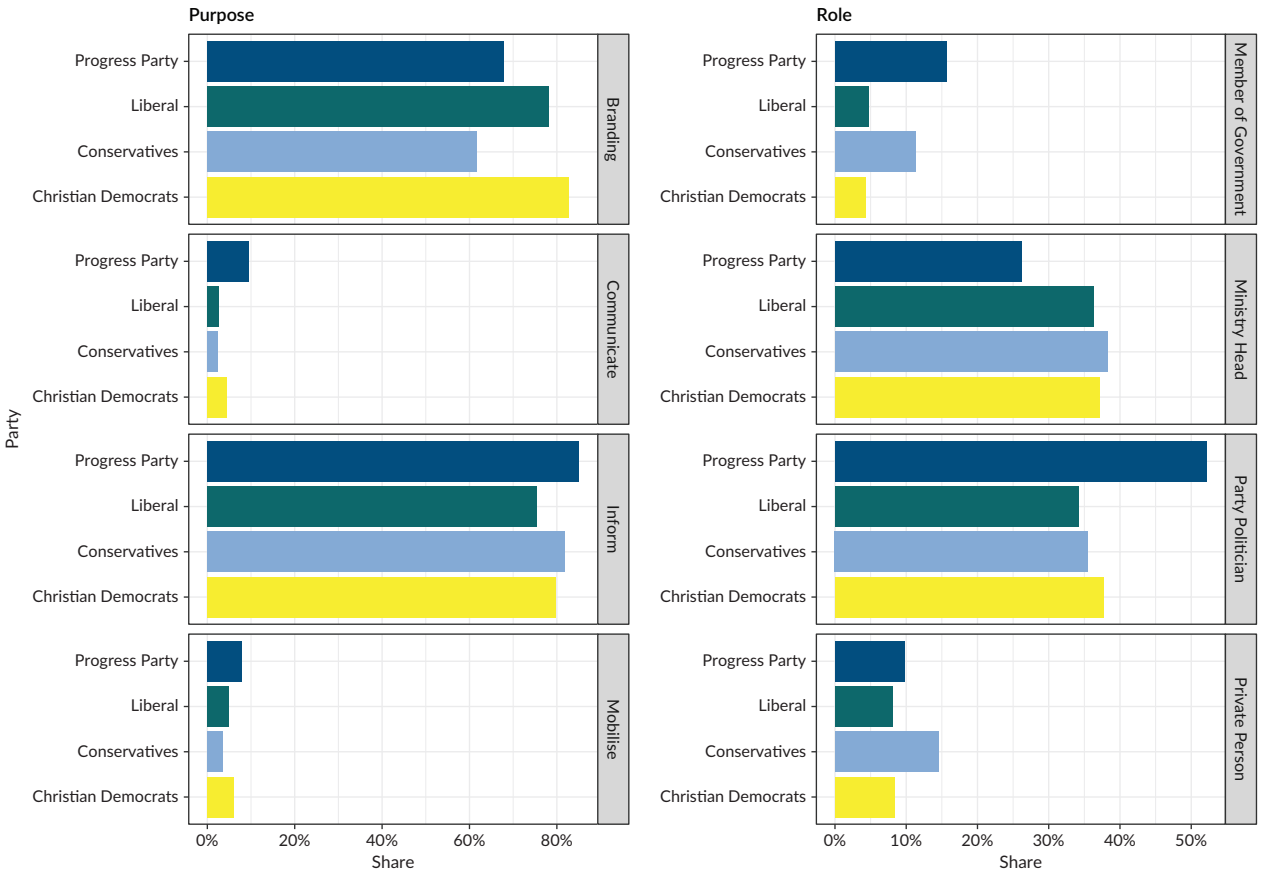


Figure 4. Shares of roles and purposes across parties.

With regard to purposes, cabinet ministers from all parties mainly provide information in their Facebook posts. However, ministers from the Progress Party, more often than ministers from the other parties, communicate and mobilize. Further, ministers from the two small parties, the Liberals and the Christian Conservatives, are more prone to post on Facebook for branding.

Figure 5 depicts the effect of communicative roles (left) and communicative purposes (right) on user reactions (shares, comments, and reactions). The dependent variable is the fixed reaction score, defined as the number of reactions divided by the mean number of reactions for that individual minister (see Section 4.1). In the left-most panel, we plot the estimates for the four different roles, with 95% confidence intervals as the lines. Only the role of a private person has a significant positive effect. The estimates indicate that a post in which the minister assumes the role of a private person receives 18 percentage points more reactions than a post in which the minister does not assume that role. In addition, posts in which the minister assumes the role of a party politician are estimated to receive four percentage points more reactions (although only significant at the 90% level). The estimates for posts in which the minister assumes the role of cabinet member or ministry head are both negative, indicating that such posts receive fewer reactions by 12 or 14 percentage points than other posts. Turning to the purposes of the post in the right-most panel, posts made with both the purposes of communicating and mobilizing receive more reactions. The estimate for posts with a branding purpose is indistinguishable from zero, while posts with an informing purpose receive fewer reactions by nine percentage points.

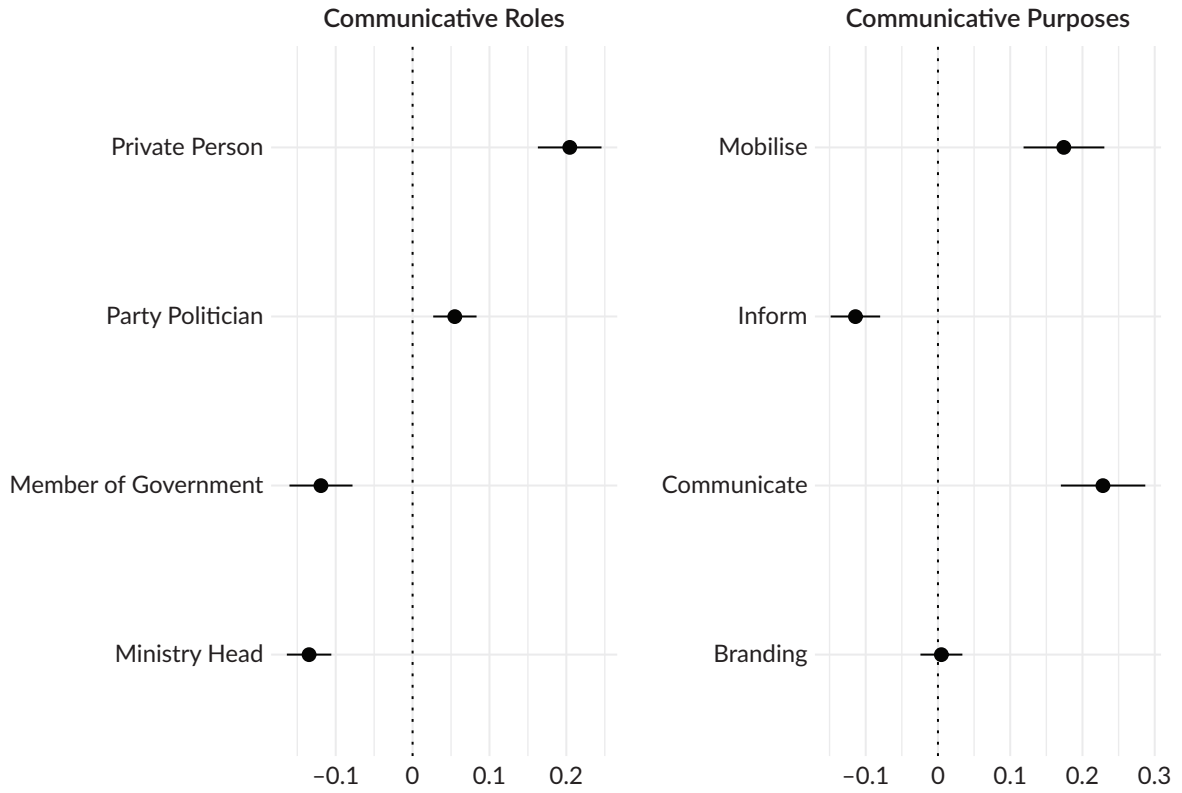


Figure 5. The relationship among communicative roles, communicative aim, and reactions (OLS regression). Note: The dots represent *b*-coefficients and the lines represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Figure 6 plots the estimates from the full model that includes all the communicative roles and purposes. The estimates are similar to the two separate regressions (Figure 5), with informing posts having fewer reactions and posts where the minister assumes the role of a private person receiving more reactions. However, in this model, the estimate for informing posts is only significant at the 90% level and, in addition, posts in which the minister assumes the role of party politician are not significantly different from other posts.

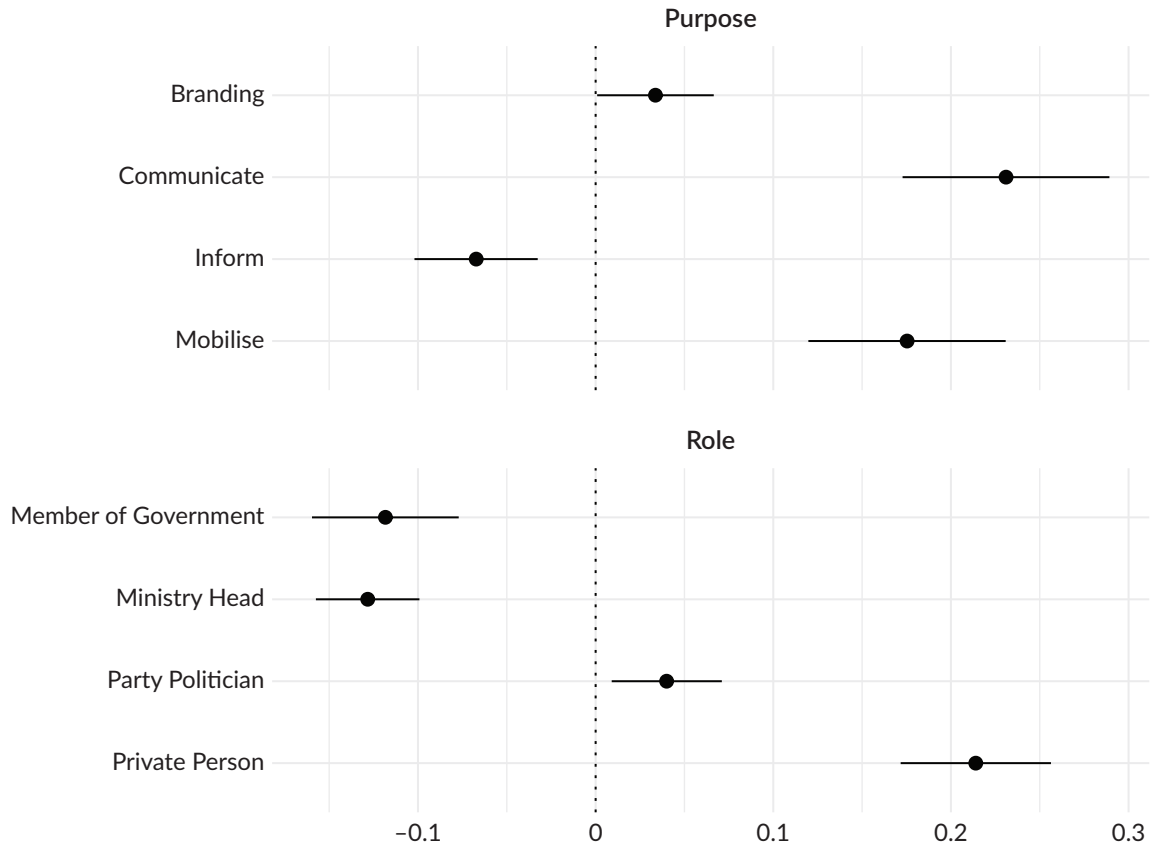


Figure 6. Full model (OLS regression). Note: The dots represent *b*-coefficients and the lines represent the 95% confidence intervals.

Finally, we review the combined effect, as role and purpose are combined in Facebook communication. Figure 7 presents the predicted values of the interaction effects between roles and purposes. Posts aimed at mobilization tend to generate the most reactions, but only in combination with roles such as cabinet member, private person, or party politician. For all roles, but particularly for cabinet member, posts that seek opinions or encourage discussions (communicate) draw more reactions. Informing, which was important across roles, appears to draw little attention, except for the role of private person. For the role of ministry head, all purposes—except communicating—receive fewer reactions than the average post. When communicating as a cabinet member and private person, branding is a smart choice.

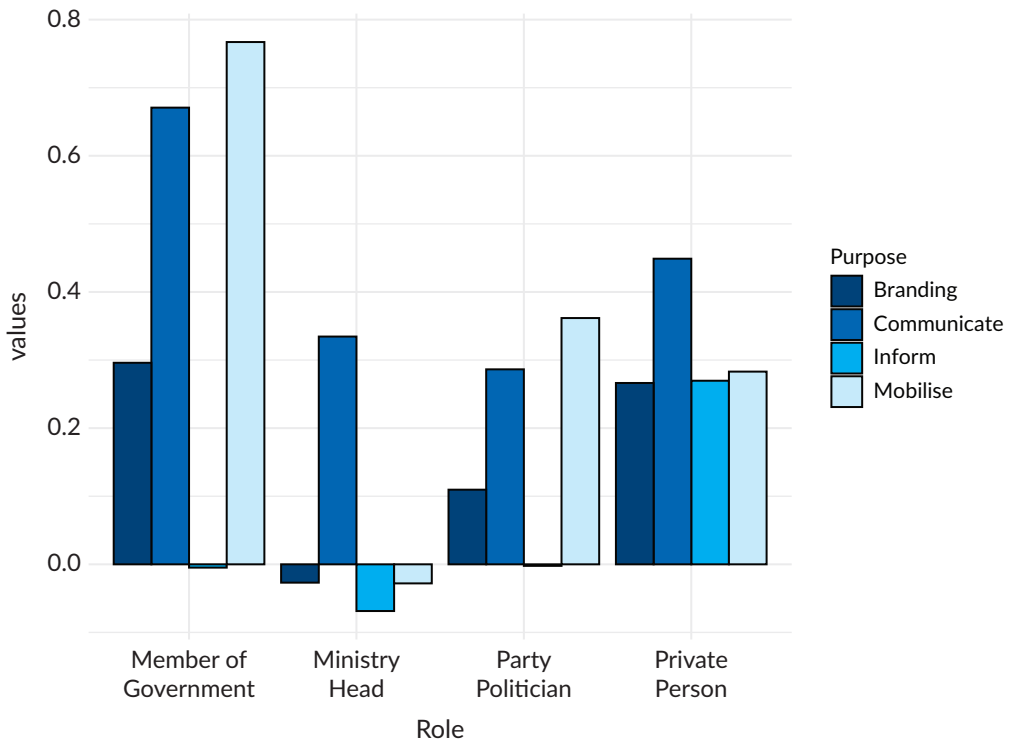


Figure 7. Predicted difference from the mean fixed reaction score for posts with different roles and purposes.

6. Concluding Discussion

The analysis revealed that cabinet ministers primarily engage on social media in two capacities: as ministry heads and party politicians. Rather than balancing party-centered and individualized content (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016), they primarily manage the tension between their ministerial and party-political roles. Additionally, the analysis indicated that the roles of cabinet member and private person are significantly less prominent in social media communication. With regard to communicative purposes, Norwegian cabinet ministers use social media mainly to inform the public and to brand themselves. Facebook is used for communication and mobilization to a much lesser extent.

Combining roles and purposes, we find that informing is essential across communicative roles, while branding is strongly related to the role of party politician. Overall, the results support the notion that the cabinet minister position is really where public information meets party promotion and through which multiple roles and purposes are balanced in a delicate manner.

Further, we found that communicative roles and purposes had a clear relationship with social media audience reactions. Audience reactions are few when politicians communicate as cabinet members, particularly with an informative purpose. However, when politicians communicate as private persons, particularly with a branding purpose, there are more audience reactions. As such, our findings tie in with former studies that find that private self-personalization triggers audience engagement, such as likes and emoji reactions (Metz et al., 2019; Russmann et al., 2024).

6.1. Theoretical and Methodological Contributions

Theoretically, we contribute a role-differentiated model that moves beyond the binary perspective of professional vs. private presented in earlier accounts of self-personalization (e.g., Metz et al., 2019; Van Santen & Van Zoonen, 2010). By connecting the principal–agent theory to social media communication, we offer a framework that links communicative behavior to formal and informal role expectations (Kiewiet & McCubbins, 1991). As per this perspective, self-personalization is not uniform but structured through multiple roles. This theoretical lens enables a more detailed analysis of self-personalization on social media, particularly in systems where ministers must balance both complex formal and informal expectations. According to this perspective, communicative behavior is shaped by competing principal demands, and ministers engage in different types of self-presentation on social media to manage these tensions.

Audience reactions also play a role in this dynamic. These reactions can be understood not only as popularity metrics but also as informal feedback signals. Such reactions are part of a communication loop in which cabinet ministers may adapt their social media communication based on engagement patterns that are interpreted in light of perceived principal expectations. While strong audience responses to the role of private person might incentivize more personalized communication, such adaptations are most likely constrained by institutional expectations related to their roles as party politicians, ministry heads, and members of the cabinet.

This combination of institutional theory with media and communication research provides a useful lens for analyzing political communication on social media and beyond, not only for cabinet ministers but also for other political actors. For example, members of parliament may need to fulfil multiple principal relationships tied to their party leadership, parliamentary committees, the party and voters in their home constituencies, and geographic responsibilities, each of which potentially shapes distinct communicative roles.

Methodologically, we contribute a combination of manual coding and machine learning. Our methodological approach provides a clear advantage by enabling the analysis of all Facebook communication by the cabinet members throughout the Norwegian government's two four-year terms in office.

6.2. Limitations and Future Research

Despite its clear advantages, the methodological approach employed here also presents several limitations that warrant closer examination. A key issue is the discrepancy between the manually coded and machine coded results. Although the main empirical patterns remain largely similar across methods the machine coding tends to overestimate the amount of informing and underestimate the amount of branding. Some of the observed differences may stem from variation in time periods and shifts in government composition. Notably, cabinet ministers from the Progress Party differ from ministers from the three other parties in terms of their communication. Thus, changes in the composition of the government, as well as going from a two-party government to a three- and four-party government and then a new three-party government, may account for a few of the differences between the results from the hand and machine-coded data. Finally, a closer look at the dataset suggests that the presence or absence of images in posts may also influence the observed discrepancies. Notably, the divergence between manual and machine-coded results is smaller when we only compare posts without images (see Figure A6 in the Supplementary File). With the recent development of multimodal LLMs and other tools that are able to

process both text and images, taking visual content into account in machine coding of social media content is a promising avenue for future research.

This study and its results are based on one cabinet in one country. As such, our findings could be country-specific or even cabinet-specific. The analysis of almost 20,000 Facebook posts provided support for the observation made from The Listhaug case: Cabinet ministers, with formal obligations to provide sober and impartial information, largely communicate as party politicians for branding purposes on social media. In Norway, the amount of party-political communication may be due to the weak centralized control and few written guidelines in this regard; this might be less extensive in other countries with stronger centralized control over communication from cabinet ministers and ministries (Johansson & Raunio, 2019, 2020; Marland et al., 2017).

The strong position of Norway's political parties (Allern et al., 2016) likely increases party-political communication and reduces the need for ministers to focus on themselves. However, in coalition cabinets, social media offers an opportunity to highlight partisan distinctions or even individual ministerial positions within the cabinet. Indeed, even in highly party-centric systems, politicians must cultivate personal visibility, not only to appeal to voters but also to gain recognition and support within the different strata of their own party (Karlsen & Enjolras, 2016).

Further, the level of cabinet unity across media platforms (including social media) could depend not only on the country and nature of the cabinet (coalition or not) but also on the leadership style of the prime minister. In the Norwegian case, Prime Minister Erna Solberg (Conservative) was accused by opposition parties of being too soft in her response to several high-profile controversies involving ministers from the populist Progress Party—for example, in the Listhaug case mentioned in Section 1. In turn, such a soft stance from the prime minister has enabled a so-called "one foot in, one foot out" strategy. This concept is used in the literature to describe how populist parties can instigate cabinet compromises on core issues while simultaneously preserving their outsider identity through party-political communication (Albertazzi & McDonnell, 2010; Askim et al., 2022; Haugsgjerd, 2019). Our empirical analysis supports this idea, revealing that ministers from the Progress Party, in particular, often communicated as party politicians while serving as cabinet ministers. Other prime ministers may adopt a stricter, more centrally controlled strategy regarding cabinet ministers' use of social media. While negative experiences from past or current cabinets might encourage future restraint, the use of social media as a party-political communication channel will likely remain a tempting prospect, irrespective of whether ministers represent populist parties.

Future research should explore how the communicative roles and purposes of ministers on social media vary across time, platform, cabinet structure, and political systems. Ministers may adapt their communication styles with experience or as public expectations and news media coverage shift. Platform affordances may also encourage different types of communicative roles. What works on Facebook may differ from Instagram, X, or TikTok. Moreover, role expectations in a single-party government may differ from those in coalition governments. Finally, different types of political systems with varying institutional settings will have different role expectations with regard to party politicians, ministry heads, and private persons.

6.3. Conclusion

To summarize, this study adds to the growing literature on government communication on social media. We theoretically argued and empirically showed that cabinet ministers have various professional functions and that these functions are balanced through multiple communicative roles that are strongly related to different communicative purposes. The constant opportunity for party-political communication from within the cabinet was limited before the advent of social media. Now, cabinet ministers, as part of the central government, can easily combine the dissemination of neutral information to citizens in addition to the promotion of party-political standpoints to core voters. On the one hand, such dual communication can appease supporters and help ease the electoral cost of governing; on the other hand, it can threaten cabinet stability and blur the possibilities of democratic accountability for voters. Such consequences are beyond the scope of this study; however, we encourage future studies to examine both the extent of cabinet ministers' social media communication and its consequences across systems with different degrees of centralization and across cabinets with different types of parties and prime ministers.

Acknowledgments

We thank Guri Barka Martins, Inga Dyngeseth, and Ingvild Kirkedam for excellent research assistance. We would also like to express gratitude to the editors and the three anonymous reviewers for their very helpful comments and suggestions.

Funding

Open-access publication of this article was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Oslo and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

All the models from the article are available on Huggingface: https://huggingface.co

Disclosure of LLMs

ChatGPT was used for language editing purposes.

Supplementary Material

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

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10464
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10464

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Digital Divides in Local Democracy: Size, Resources, and Facebook Adoption in Czech Municipalities

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Submitted: 31 March 2025 **Accepted:** 6 August 2025 **Published:** 23 September 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

This study examines how organizational capacity and environmental pressures shape social media adoption in local government. Using a mixed-methods approach, we analyze Facebook adoption patterns across 6,254 Czech municipalities by scanning their official websites for Facebook links, a questionnaire survey ($N = 330$), and thematic analysis of posts from municipalities with extended powers. Results reveal a strong relationship between municipal size and Facebook adoption, with rates ranging from 14.1% in the smallest municipalities (fewer than 200 inhabitants) to 88.6% in the largest (10,000+). Primary adoption motivations include communication speed, ensuring citizen awareness, and meeting public expectations for a modern online presence, while resource constraints and fear of negativity constitute major barriers. Thematic analysis reveals dominance of practical information and community event promotion over dialogic engagement. The findings demonstrate how resource limitations create a digital divide in local government communication, with smaller municipalities facing structural barriers to social media adoption. This research contributes to understanding technology diffusion dynamics in fragmented administrative systems and the gap between social media's dialogic potential and actual government communication practices.

Keywords

citizen engagement; communication barriers; Czech Republic; Facebook; government communication; local government; small municipalities; social media; technology adoption

1. Introduction

Social media represents a major trend with the potential for innovation in how public administrations communicate and operate (Criado et al., 2013). In an era where platforms such as Facebook and X (previously Twitter) are permeating the daily lives of an increasing proportion of the population,

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understanding their role and using them effectively becomes not only an opportunity but a necessity for local governments. These tools offer new, often cost-effective channels for rapid information dissemination, increasing transparency of government actions (Bertot et al., 2010), self-presentation, and even citizen engagement in the design and delivery of public services (Sobaci, 2016).

To offer a nuanced understanding of social media adoption and utilization within local government, our approach leverages two complementary theoretical lenses that provide complementary explanatory power: Everett Rogers' (1962) diffusion of innovations (DOI) theory and the technology–organization–environment (TOE) framework (Tornatzky et al., 1990). TOE groups the factors that shape technology uptake into three domains: technological characteristics (e.g., relative advantage), organizational capacity (e.g., size, staff, budget), and environmental pressures (e.g., citizen expectations, competitive norms). Using TOE alongside DOI lets us separate what municipalities can do from what their external context demands.

DOI serves as a primary lens for understanding organizational decision making—including both internal capacities and external social networks through which information flows—that influences innovation adoption. It accounts for adoption decisions driven by an organization's internal characteristics, such as its organizational capacity (e.g., available resources, internal expertise, organizational size) and the perceived attributes of the innovation itself (e.g., relative advantage, complexity, compatibility, trialability, observability). The TOE "environment" dimension complements DOI by highlighting external legitimacy expectations that operate beyond pure efficiency.

Our analytical focus, driven by the interplay of organizational capacity (informed by DOI) and environmental pressures (the TOE framework) in shaping communication strategies, leads to our study's central question: How do organizational capacity and environmental pressures shape social media adoption and communication strategies within a large and highly fragmented local government system?

This study aims to answer this question by addressing gaps in the literature. As the scholarly conversation on social media in public administration continues to evolve (e.g., Ahn & Jong, 2024; Criado & Villodre, 2023; DePaula et al., 2018; Mabillard et al., 2024), the practice of social media use by small municipalities, especially in the post-communist context, remains under-researched. Even when research does examine this sector, such as the work of Pawlicz and Kubicki (2017) on Polish municipalities, it is typically based on a sample rather than the complete population. To fill this void, our study provides comprehensive empirical data by analyzing the entire population of all 6,254 Czech municipalities. Furthermore, to address the documented gap between municipal communication efforts and citizen expectations (Criado & Villodre, 2023), we methodologically combine this large-scale mapping with mixed-methods research, including a survey and thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), to link stated motivations with actual practice.

2. Theoretical Framework and Literature Review

2.1. The Rise of Social Media in Public Administration

Social media are seen as tools with the potential to transform the relationship between citizens and government (Mossberger et al., 2013), promote openness and transparency, and even contribute to the fight against corruption (Bertot et al., 2010). Local governments, which are closest to citizens and where

participation has traditionally been strongest (Mossberger et al., 2013), are not left out of this trend and are implementing innovative internet technologies (Sobaci, 2016). For them, a social media presence can become a symbol of modernity, responsiveness, and political legitimacy, especially in times of crisis (Bonsón et al., 2016).

2.2. Adoption and Diffusion of Social Media by Local Governments

Social media use has become widespread among local governments, with Facebook established as a commonplace tool among major Western European municipalities (Bonsón et al., 2016) and American cities showing similar adoption patterns (Reddick & Norris, 2013). Facebook and X are among the most commonly adopted platforms (Mossberger et al., 2013), with Facebook often preferred (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Yavetz & Aharony, 2020). However, adoption is not uniform and is influenced by a number of factors. Key ones include the size of the local government, its type and form, the region, previous experience with e-government, the existence of an IT department (Reddick & Norris, 2013), but also socio-economic indicators such as revenues, expenditures, fiscal capacity, or characteristics of the municipal leadership (Prokopyev et al., 2024), which suggests that organizational behavior is often shaped by the need to acquire and manage critical resources from the environment. This view is further developed by the socio-technical model, according to which the use of technology is not simply a matter of availability, but the result of a complex interaction between technology, the tasks to be performed, and the broader organizational context including precisely resources, capabilities, and innovative culture (Oliveira & Welch, 2013). This framework is particularly useful in explaining why resource-constrained municipalities face structural barriers to social media adoption. Some studies suggest that despite the high diffusion of technology, its strategic incorporation and development may still be at an early stage (Criado & Rojas-Martín, 2016) and in the early stages of learning (Svirak et al., 2023).

First, DOI theory provides a powerful lens for explaining the ability of municipalities to adopt social media. According to DOI, organizational characteristics, such as size, budget, and staffing, are key predictors of an organization's capacity to innovate (Rogers, 1962). This understanding of organizational capacity is strongly supported by empirical evidence. Studies highlighting the importance of organizational size and the presence of dedicated IT departments (Reddick & Norris, 2013), as well as overall fiscal capacity (Prokopyev et al., 2024), illustrate how these resources provide the necessary foundation for municipalities to evaluate, adopt, and effectively implement new technologies like social media. This theoretical and empirical basis enables the formulation of a specific, testable hypothesis about the relationship between municipal resources and technology adoption. We therefore hypothesize:

> Larger municipalities, possessing higher organizational capacity, will exhibit a greater likelihood of adopting Facebook for official communication.

Within TOE, environmental forces include stakeholder expectations, inter-municipal competition, and prevailing communication norms. We therefore expect some municipalities to adopt Facebook not only for its functional benefits but also because a social-media presence has become a taken-for-granted feature of modern local government.

While our primary focus is on Facebook adoption as a key indicator of social media engagement, understanding the broader digital landscape is crucial. Therefore, to comprehensively map municipal digital communication efforts, we ask:

> RQ1: Beyond Facebook, what other social media or digital communication platforms are used by Czech municipalities?

2.3. Communication Strategy and Content on Social Media

Although social media inherently enables two-way communication and dialogue, the dominant strategy of local governments across different countries appears to be one-way dissemination of information ("push" strategy; Baltz, 2023; Mossberger et al., 2013; Reddick & Norris, 2013) often aligning more with informational or asymmetrical public relations models (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) than with the normative ideals of symmetrical, dialogic communication (Kent & Taylor, 2002). This approach is sometimes referred to as "Web 1.5," suggesting limited use of the interactive possibilities of Web 2.0 (Reddick & Norris, 2013). Local governments often prioritize visual content (images, videos), use paid advertising to increase reach (Yavetz & Aharony, 2020), and content can include official information and promotion (e.g., cultural events, marketing [Bonsón et al., 2015]), city branding (Sevin, 2016), as well as everyday, mundane issues (Baltz, 2023). Some research identifies the strategic use of social media for political purposes and legitimacy building where the topics of posts correlate with the spending priorities of the municipality (Ravenda et al., 2022). Communication is often subject to scrutiny to manage risks (Evans et al., 2018). This whole range of communication activities, from the provision of information to marketing activities to strategic legitimacy building, is summarized in a comprehensive typology of government communication proposed by DePaula et al. (2018). It distinguishes between communication serving democratic goals (e.g., information) and communication aimed at symbolic and self-representational exchanges, which include image building, marketing, and symbolic acts of community empowerment (DePaula et al., 2018). This framework thus provides a useful tool for analyzing the diverse content that local governments produce on social media.

To understand the practical application of these communication strategies, we ask the following:

> RQ2: What are the dominant themes and characteristics of communication content on the official Facebook pages of municipalities with extended powers (MEPs) in the Czech Republic?

2.4. Citizen Engagement and Participation

Strengthening citizen engagement and participation is one of the goals of the use of social media by local governments (Ellison & Hardey, 2014; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). Social media are seen as channels for e-participation (Alarabiat, 2016) and dialogue building (Mossberger et al., 2013). Research shows that certain types of content, especially those related to core competencies of local government and local politics, have a greater potential to elicit citizen reactions and comments (Paiva Dias, 2022). Factors such as local government activity on the platform, interactivity, and the overall mood of the communication also influence the level of engagement (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Svirak & Urbánek, 2023).

Despite these potentials, however, empirical data show significant differences in engagement levels among different media and content types and institutional contexts (Bonsón et al., 2015). Despite the large number of fans or followers, active citizen participation in the form of comments or sharing is often limited (Bonsón et al., 2016), with municipalities using Facebook mainly for ex-ante informing and calling for participation in decision-making being very limited (Svidroňová et al., 2018). Dialogue is sometimes redirected outside official platforms (Baltz, 2023) and there can be a mismatch between what local governments communicate and what citizens actually expect or prefer (Bonsón et al., 2015; Criado & Villodre, 2023). The use of social media can also positively influence citizens' trust in institutions (Warren et al., 2014).

2.5. Challenges, Barriers, and Institutionalization

Despite the diffusion of social media, local governments face a number of challenges in using it effectively, which are mainly organizational and strategic barriers. One significant challenge is that initial actions and strategies for social media promotion have either not been clearly defined or have been inadequately implemented (Criado & Rojas-Martín, 2016), security concerns, unfavorable organizational culture, lack of evaluation and monitoring systems, and unclear governance framework (Criado & Villodre, 2022). Concerns over security, potential negativity, and loss of control often reflect underlying issues of risk perception (Slovic, 2000), where the perceived hazards of open digital communication can act as significant deterrents for public administrators. Administrators may experience skepticism or uncertainty towards social media and technology, highlighting the need for training (Svirak et al., 2023) as well as higher degrees of formalized knowledge sharing for social media use in bureaucratic environments (Mergel, 2013b). Measuring the real impact of social media activities is often inadequate (Mergel, 2013a). The consequence of these barriers and uncertainty is often only partial institutionalization of social media. Rather than becoming a tool for transformation, they are often seen as merely complementing existing, established communication channels and reinforcing existing media strategies rather than replacing them (Djerf-Pierre & Pierre, 2016).

The process of "institutionalization," i.e., the full integration of social media into the normal functioning of the office, is often incomplete (Criado & Villodre, 2022). Research has identified different organizational models for this process, ranging from centralized to distributed, which vary in their degree of formalization, experimentation, and control (Faber, 2023). Overcoming these barriers and successful institutionalization are key to realizing the full potential of social media in local government.

To explore the motivations and barriers that shape adoption patterns, we formulate our final research questions:

RQ3: What are the main stated reasons why Czech municipalities use social media?

RQ4: What are the main declared reasons why some Czech municipalities do not use social media?

2.6. Specifics of the Czech Context in The Existing Research

To place our study in a broader national context, it is important to mention the high level of digitization in the country. As of the beginning of 2024, internet penetration in the Czech Republic was 92.8% and 76.7% of the population used social media (Kemp, 2024). Facebook, the primary focus of this research, maintained

a significant position with an advertising reach of 4.70 million users, underlining its relevance as a key communication channel for reaching the general public (Kemp, 2024). Research on the use of social media by local governments in the Czech Republic, although still relatively limited (Špaček, 2018), has already yielded several relevant findings that provide context for this study. This confirms the strong dominance of the Facebook platform which is used by regional authorities (Špaček, 2018), regional cities (Hrůzová & Hrůza, 2021; Svobodova, 2017), and MEPs (Svirak & Urbánek, 2023). Consistent with international trends, studies in the Czech environment show that Facebook serves primarily as a one-way information channel (Špaček, 2018) with very limited calls for citizen participation in decision-making; a similar trend is suggested by a study from Slovakia (Svidroňová et al., 2018). Research focusing on MEPs has identified municipal activity, level of interactivity, and communication sentiment as key factors influencing citizen engagement, with larger municipalities dominating activity on social media (Svirak & Urbánek, 2023). A qualitative study of smaller and medium-sized Czech municipalities (Svirak et al., 2023) suggests that many of these municipalities are in the early stages of learning, do not fully understand the potential of social media, and may approach it with skepticism or feel confused about optimal strategies for use.

3. Methodology

In this study, we use a mixed-methods design, combining quantitative and qualitative data collected simultaneously which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon under study—the use of social media by Czech municipalities. The quantitative data (Facebook presence mapping, closed-ended questions in the questionnaire) provide an overview of the extent and patterns of use, while the qualitative data (open-ended questions in the questionnaire, thematic analysis) offer deeper insights into the motivations, strategies, and content of communication. The data are analyzed separately and then the findings are compared and integrated in the discussion section for a fuller interpretation.

3.1. Facebook Adoption Mapping (Proxy Method)

Answering RQ1 required a two-step process. First, to assess the nationwide level of Facebook adoption, we analyzed the full population of all 6,254 Czech municipalities. We then examined whether adoption varies with municipal size. Due to the large number of municipalities, we used a proxy method to determine the presence of an official Facebook page. For each municipality, the URLs of official websites were first obtained, primarily through the Wikidata database and Wikipedia, whose reliability and comprehensiveness for identifying and baseline characteristics of Czech politics have been previously verified in other research (Haman et al., 2024).

Municipal websites were systematically searched for official Facebook page links using automated detection with validation filters (see Supplementary File for technical details). The population was also obtained from the Czech Statistical Office (Czech Statistical Office, 2024). The second phase of the process had a dual purpose: to validate the reliability of our automated proxy method and to select a purposive sample for in-depth thematic analysis (described in detail in Section 3.3). For this purpose, we used a purposive sampling strategy. We deliberately selected the complete sub-population of "MEPs." In the Czech administrative system, a MEP is a municipality that, in addition to its self-government tasks, carries out a broad bundle of delegated state-administration competences for a surrounding cluster of smaller municipalities. Because of these extra ("extended") powers, MEPs function as the main administrative

centers below the regional tier (*kraje*). In total there are 205 such municipalities, with the capital city of Prague constituting an entity with special status.

3.2. Questionnaire Survey

To answer RQ2 and RQ3, more detailed and direct data was needed from municipal leaders themselves on their use of social media. Data were collected through a broader survey conducted as part of a larger research project, Akademický Most (Academic Bridge) (https://akademickymost.cz), aimed at fostering collaboration between municipalities and academic researchers. This initiative is a component of the EU-funded BETTER Life project. Although the full survey included questions on other topics, the section on social media was designed specifically by the authors of this article to address the research questions presented here (see Supplementary File for detailed questionnaire design).

The questionnaire was distributed electronically on 1 March 2025. All municipalities in the Czech Republic were selected as the target population. The email addresses were primarily obtained from the CzechPOINT portal but other sources, such as Wikipedia or a search engine, were also used to find the actual email contact and the questionnaire was sent to the official email address of the registry of each municipality or to the found suitable contact. Of all the municipalities contacted, 330 chose to participate in the social media survey, which is 5.3% of all municipalities in the country. The survey sample exhibited significant non-response bias favoring larger municipalities, which should be considered when interpreting questionnaire findings for RQ3 and RQ4 (see Supplementary File).

3.3. Thematic Analysis of Facebook Communication

In order to complement the questionnaire data with insights into actual communication practices and to answer RQ2, we conducted a thematic analysis of posts on the official Facebook pages of the municipalities with the extended powers. We first downloaded every post published in January 2025 by the 198 MEPs that maintain an official Facebook page (7,251 posts). We then drew a stratified random sample of up to five posts per municipality ($N = 960$). The themes were generated inductively. Authors coded the posts to identify key patterns and then met to compare their findings, discuss discrepancies, and agree on a final set of themes. The Facepager software (Jünger & Keyling, 2019) was used for data collection which enables automated downloading of publicly available data from Facebook pages.

4. Results

In this section, we present the main findings of our research, structured according to the individual research questions. We combine data from Facebook presence mapping, questionnaire survey, and thematic analysis.

4.1. Extent of Use of Facebook and Other Social Media by Czech Municipalities

Our proxy method of mapping the presence of Facebook links on the official websites of Czech municipalities revealed a significant dependence of the adoption rate on the size of the municipality. As shown in Table 1, the overall rate of detected Facebook link presence across all municipalities is 35.2%. However, this average hides substantial differences between size categories.

Table 1. Facebook page link prevalence on Czech municipal websites by population.

Population category	Total municipalities (*N*)	With Facebook link	Without Facebook link	Facebook Link prevalence (%)
<200	1,350	190	1,160	14.1%
200–499	1,998	546	1,452	27.3%
500–999	1,374	530	844	38.6%
1,000–1,999	806	401	405	49.8%
2,000–4,999	448	290	158	64.7%
5,000–9,999	146	127	19	87%
10,000+	132	117	15	88.6%
Total	6,254	2,201	4,053	35.2%

Analysis of data from mapping the presence of links to official Facebook pages on the websites of Czech municipalities reveals a strong and positive relationship between the size of the municipality and the prevalence of these links, which is used here as a proxy indicator for Facebook adoption (see Table 1 and Figure 1). The table shows a clear trend: The link prevalence rate increases dramatically with increasing municipality size. The data reveal a strong positive relationship between municipality size and Facebook adoption, ranging from 14.1% in the smallest to 88.6% in the largest municipalities (Table 1).

Since a proxy method (web link detection) was used to detect the presence of Facebook, which may slightly underestimate the true situation (some municipalities using Facebook may not have a web link), it is important to statistically verify the strength and consistency of the observed relationship across the dataset. For this purpose, a Chi-squared test of independence was performed. Test results confirmed a highly statistically significant association between the size category of a municipality and the presence of a Facebook link on its website ($\chi^2(6, N = 6{,}254) = 908.40$, $p < 0.001$). Such a strong statistical result, obtained on the basis of data from all municipalities analyzed, gives us high confidence, despite the potential limitations of the proxy method, that the observed trend of a dramatic increase in prevalence with municipality size is not random but reflects a real and systematic association. It suggests that the size of the municipality, likely linked to available resources and communication needs, is a key differentiating factor for municipalities in their visible engagement with the Facebook platform.

This result is particularly relevant in the context of the Czech municipal structure. Although more than half of the Czech municipalities (53.5%) fall into the categories below 500 inhabitants, their Facebook link prevalence rates are very low (14.1% and 27.4%). On the contrary, a relatively small number of the largest municipalities (category 10,000+, constituting only 2.1% of all municipalities but representing more than half of the Czech population) show an almost universal presence of Facebook links, indicating a significant concentration of this form of digital communication in larger municipalities. Figure 1 visualizes the Table 1 data, with results suggesting a pattern that reflects fundamental urban dynamics: Larger municipalities cannot rely on personal contact and require mass communication channels. Thus, the gradient represents not just resource differences but a qualitative shift in how communities communicate.

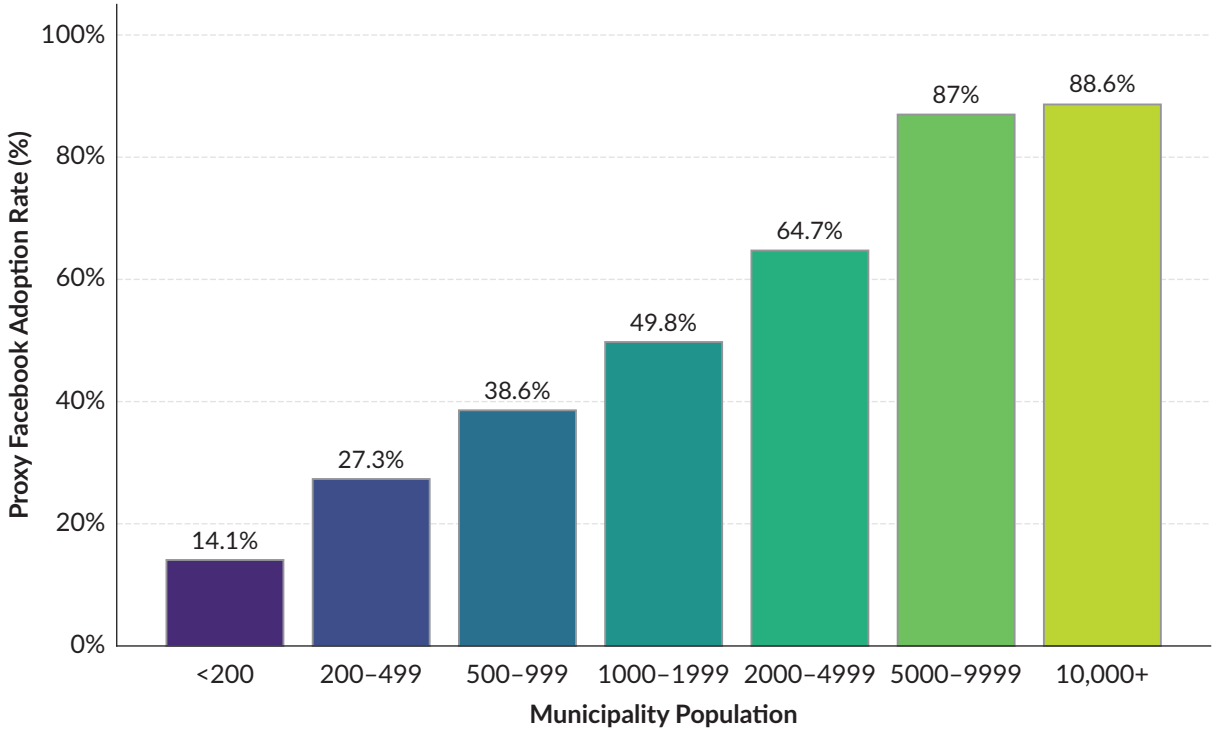


Figure 1. Prevalence of Facebook page links (proxy adoption rate) by municipality population category (%).

These findings on the dominance of Facebook as a platform are further supported by data from our survey (see Table 2). The survey provided a closer look at the range of digital platforms that municipalities actively use for communication. Of the 330 respondents, 243 (or 73.6%) indicated that their municipality uses at least some form of social media or similar digital communication platform. A detailed overview of the use of each platform is shown in Table 2, which presents both absolute numbers and percentages relative to all respondents ($N = 330$) and to the subset of municipalities active on these platforms ($n = 243$).

Table 2. Social media platform usage by municipalities (survey; $N = 330$).

Platform	*N*	Share of all respondents (%)	Share of municipalities using social media (%)
Facebook	232	70.3%	95.5%
WhatsApp	82	24.8%	33.7%
Instagram	61	18.5%	25.1%
YouTube	41	12.4%	16.9%
X	3	0.9%	1.2%
LinkedIn	3	0.9%	1.2%
Telegram	0	0%	0%
TikTok	0	0%	0%
Others	28	8.5%	11.5%

The results clearly confirm Facebook's dominance. This platform is used by 70.3% of all respondents, which represents the vast majority (95.5%) of those municipalities that are active on social media or similar platforms. This is followed by WhatsApp (used by 24.8% of all respondents or 33.7% of active municipalities)

and Instagram (18.5% of all respondents or 25.1% of active ones). Other global platforms such as YouTube, X, LinkedIn, or TikTok play a significantly smaller role in the communication of Czech municipalities according to our sample. The "other" category is interesting, chosen by 8.5% of all respondents (11.5% of active municipalities).

The analysis of these "other" communication platforms used revealed especially frequent mention of specialized tools designed for communication between local governments and citizens. Platforms such as Munipolis and V Obraze (meaning "In the Picture") were dominantly mentioned, along with other similar locally developed applications like Úřad v mobilu ("Office in Mobile") and Appsisto. These systems, typically combining a mobile app with email or SMS, are primarily used to efficiently distribute official information, notifications, and warnings to registered citizens. Less frequently mentioned was Facebook Messenger for direct communication.

The fact that municipal officials refer to these tools in the context of a social media inquiry is noteworthy. It suggests either a broader perception of the term "social media" to include any digital communication channels with citizens or it reflects a priority for municipalities to seek efficient and controlled ways to distribute information. However, it is important to point out that in a strict definition of social media that emphasizes user-generated content, relationship networking, and multi-directional communication in an open space, most of the platforms mentioned do not meet the criteria of social media. Rather, they are modern tools for direct, often one-way, digital information and specific forms of e-government that complement or are alternatives to traditional social networks.

4.2. Declared Reasons for Using and Not Using Social Media

An open-ended question in the questionnaire provided rich insight into the motivations of communities that have chosen to actively use social media. From the survey, 156 respondents provided answers detailing their reasons in response to this open-ended question. Analysis of the 156 open-ended responses, which included a coding and categorization process, revealed five main categories of reasons, which are summarized in Table 3.

Table 3. Declared reasons for municipalities' use of social media.

Main reasons	Description
Faster and more efficient communication	Respondents stressed that social media allows for the instantaneous delivery of information, which is particularly crucial for urgent messages (e.g., accidents, alerts). They perceived it as the fastest way to reach citizens, saving time and administrative burden associated with other channels (e.g., print, radio). For example: "The fastest way to inform citizens about events in the municipality," "things get to the citizens immediately."
Ensuring awareness and wide reach	The main declared aim was to inform as many citizens as possible about what is happening in the municipality. Social media was seen as a tool to extend the reach of traditional channels (websites, newsletters) and to reach specific groups that do not follow other channels, especially the younger generation. For example: "We can reach and inform a larger number of citizens this way," "wide reach, especially for the young."

Table 3. (Cont.) Declared reasons for municipalities' use of social media.

Main reasons	Description
Supporting community life and promoting the municipality	A frequent theme was the desire to promote cultural and sporting events organized by the municipality or associations. Social media was used to share positive news, photos from events, and to strengthen local identity and pride. The aim was also to show that the municipality is alive and to present it in a good light externally. For example: "Promotion of events in the municipality, promotion of the municipality itself," "sharing photos from cultural events…makes the cultural life of the municipality visible."
Enabling interaction and feedback	Some respondents mentioned the potential for closer contact with citizens, the ability to respond quickly to inquiries, and to receive valuable feedback and suggestions. For example: "Finding out feedback, opinions," "we are closer to the citizens."
Responding to modern trends and expectations	The pragmatic justification that the use of social media is now a necessity, a standard, and a response to social trends and the digital age was quite often heard. Municipalities have introduced them because citizens expect it. For example: "Because it is expected," "the times demand it."

The analysis shows that the main drivers for social media adoption are pragmatic reasons related to efficiency and outreach. Speed and the ability to reach a wide audience, including specific demographic groups, are seen as key benefits. Promoting community life and municipal self-presentation is also an important consideration. The aspect of two-way communication and feedback is mentioned but seems to be less of a priority than the information and promotion function. Finally, there is the factor of a certain "social pressure" and the perception of social media as a necessary part of modern communication. This pragmatic justification illustrates an environmental legitimacy pressure in TOE: Officials perceive that a modern municipality is simply expected to maintain a social-media presence.

Just as important as understanding the motivations for use is analyzing the barriers that prevent some communities from adopting social media. From the survey respondents, 39 provided answers detailing their reasons for non-use in response to the relevant open-ended question. Analysis of the 39 open-ended responses from municipalities that do not use social media, which included a coding and categorization process, revealed four main categories of reasons (Table 4).

Thus, the dominant barriers are a lack of resources (time, personnel) and strong fears of negative aspects of online communication (conflicts, criticism). Especially in smaller municipalities, there is also a belief in the sufficiency of traditional communication channels and sometimes skepticism about the real need or benefit of social media for their specific context. These results correlate strongly with the finding of lower Facebook adoption rates in smaller municipalities (Table 1).

Table 4. Declared reasons for municipalities' non-use of social media.

Main reasons	Description
Limited resources and capacity	A frequently cited reason was the lack of time and staff capacity to manage the profiles. Respondents reported that they do not have anyone to manage them at the required level of quality and consistency. Financial demands (e.g., for graphics, advertising) and a feeling that resources should be allocated to more important tasks and the basic running of the municipality were also frequently mentioned. Social media management was perceived as an extra burden. For example: "Capacity-wise, there is no person here who would manage the medium," "no one was found who would manage it," "we need to solve more substantial topics," "we struggle to find time to manage the municipality well," and "another time sink."
Concerns about negativity and risks	A very strong theme was the fear of negative comments, hate, and insults. Respondents expressed concerns about uncontrolled discussions, spreading misinformation, and having to constantly resolve conflicts. The anonymity of the online environment was perceived as problematic. The risk of damaging the reputation of the municipality or the representatives themselves was often perceived as too high. For example: "React to various hates," "due to sparking discussion under the post, which you can never control, spreading misinformation," "because it is misleading, manipulative," "anonymity of discussion participants…gives an opportunity for personal frustrations to vent," and "their benefit is lower than the possible risks."
Sufficiency of existing channels and preference for personal contact	Many respondents (especially from smaller municipalities) stated that the existing communication channels—municipal radio, bulletin board, website, newsletter, email—were fully sufficient for their needs. They stressed the value and preference for personal contact with citizens, which they considered more effective and transparent than online communication. For example: "For the need for information, it is sufficient to regularly update the municipal website," "we have a website and phones. Plus the local radio," "personal contact between people is irreplaceable," and "if citizens need to resolve something, a personal visit to the municipal leadership is a more suitable form."
Low perceived relevance and need	Some respondents expressed skepticism about the real benefits of social media for their community. They argued the small size of the municipality, the lack of relevant news to share frequently, or the age structure of the population who, in their opinion, do not use or are not interested in social media. The use of social media was sometimes perceived as an unnecessary fashion. For example: "We see no benefit," "small municipality, 100 inhabitants," "lack of news to maintain a live environment," "most inhabitants are older and don't know how to use technology," "not needed," and "it seems redundant to me."

4.3. Dominant Themes and Characteristics of Facebook Communication

A thematic analysis of 960 randomly selected posts from MEPs from January 2025 revealed what these administratively stronger municipalities communicate about on Facebook. We identified six main themes which are detailed in Table 5.

The analysis shows that the communication of the MEPs on Facebook is quite diverse in terms of topics, but practical information (Topics 1, 3, 6) and promotion of local events and community life (Topic 4) dominate. Information on the development and maintenance of the town (Topic 2) also forms a significant part of

Table 5. Themes and sub-themes in Facebook communication of Czech MEPs.

Topics	Subthemes (specific examples of typical content)
1. Practical information and services for citizens	Information on local fees (waste collections, dogs), payment deadlines
	Details on waste management (collection schedule, recycling sorting, collection yards, composters)
	Information on municipal services (social services, rentals, lost and found)
	Job opening announcements for positions at the city hall
2. City development and maintenance	Information on ongoing and planned investments, reconstruction (repairs of pavements, roads, buildings, public spaces)
	Showcase of new projects (construction of parks, playgrounds, bike paths)
	Reports on routine maintenance of city property (tree maintenance)
	Green and environmental care (tree planting, cleanup events)
3. Traffic and traffic restrictions	Update on road closures and detours due to repairs or events
	Announcements on changes in public transport timetables, relocation of bus stops
	Information on parking (new parking spaces, changes in rules)
	Updates on traffic construction affecting traffic flow
4. Community life and events	Invitations to cultural events (concerts, theatres, exhibitions)
	Information about sporting events (matches of local clubs, tournaments, cross-country races)
	Promotion of events for families and leisure (children's events, workshops)
	Reminder of traditional events (carnival, welcoming of new citizens/babies)
5. Building relationships with citizens and the presentation of the city	General greetings and holiday wishes (New Year)
	Expressions of gratitude (e.g., for attending an event, for sorting waste)
	Presentation of the city's identity (historical photos, points of interest, symbols of the city)
	Information about opportunities for citizen involvement (participatory budgeting, public hearings, surveys)
	Updates on cooperation with partner cities or organizations
	Sharing the successes of the city or its citizens (awards, sporting achievements)
6. Official information and safety alerts	Official announcements from the city hall (changes in office hours, budget information, new ordinances)
	Links to other information sources (websites, mobile apps, newsletters)
	Safety information (weather alerts, crime prevention, police and fire information)
	Notifications of planned outages (water, electricity) or emergencies

communication, which often also serves a PR function, as it presents the activity and achievements of the municipal leadership. Posts explicitly focused on relationship building and dialogue (part of Topic 5, e.g., calls for discussion, responses to comments) were also present in our random sample, while elements such as greetings or thank you notes were present. Overall, it seems that the communication of the MEPs on Facebook primarily fulfills an informative and promotional function aimed at ensuring that citizens are informed about practical matters and events in the municipality.

These empirical findings resonate strongly with the typology of government communication proposed by DePaula et al. (2018). While Topics 1, 2, 3, and 6 clearly fall into the category of "information provision,"

Topics 4 and 5—i.e., community life and relationship building—are textbook examples of the categories of "symbolic acts" and "favorable presentation" (DePaula et al., 2018). This suggests that a substantial part of the communication of Czech municipalities on Facebook is not only focused on fulfilling an informational obligation but also on image building and strengthening community identity.

5. Discussion

This study aimed to provide a comprehensive analysis of the use of social media by Czech municipalities in the unique context of the highly fragmented structure of local government in the country. Using a mixed research design—combining a large-scale proxy mapping of Facebook presence, a nationwide survey, and a focused thematic analysis of the communication of MEPs—we sought to understand the extent of adoption, the motivations and barriers influencing usage and the nature of communication practices on the dominant Facebook platform. The findings offer important insights into the dynamics of local government communication in the digital age and have implications for theory, practice, and democratic engagement.

Addressing our hypothesis, our findings offer confirmation of the role of municipal size in social media adoption. The significant gradient in the proxy of Facebook adoption rate, rising from only 14.1% in the smallest municipalities (<200 inhabitants) to almost 90% in the largest (10,000+ inhabitants), strongly supports the thesis of DOI theory particularly its emphasis on how an organization's internal characteristics and resources (Rogers, 1962) enable the adoption of innovations, aligning also with broader socio-technical models emphasizing the role of organizational context (Oliveira & Welch, 2013). This pattern reveals how Wirth's (1938) fundamental insight about size as a key urban characteristic manifests in the digital age. Our findings, supported by recent research from Belgium (Mabillard et al., 2024), demonstrate that size now also determines digital communication capacity. This creates a new layer of urban–rural differentiation, raising critical questions about the future of small municipalities in an era where digital presence increasingly shapes democratic participation.

These findings let us place Czech municipalities, in broad strokes, on Rogers' diffusion curve (1962). The largest cities (≥10,000 residents), which moved onto Facebook earliest and now show almost universal coverage, occupy the leading "innovator/early-adopter" edge. Most medium-sized towns (about 2,000–10,000 residents) sit in the broad majority segment, taking up the tool once its usefulness and peer expectations became clear. The very small municipalities, especially those below 500 inhabitants, form the tail of the distribution and will supply most of the late-majority and eventual laggard cohort. Their hesitation is not simply resistance to change: with skeletal staffs, tight budgets, and still-effective offline channels such as village notice boards, spending scarce capacity on social media can look imprudent.

Our findings regarding platform choice (RQ1) reveal the clear dominance of Facebook, a result consistent with many international contexts (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018; Yavetz & Aharony, 2020). However, the noticeable presence of WhatsApp (used by more than a third of municipalities active on social media) and the frequent mention of specialized municipal communication platforms such as Munipolis in the "other" category (discussion of Table 2) suggest a more nuanced environment. WhatsApp arguably serves the needs of direct, perhaps internal or close group communication, while the popularity of tools such as Munipolis points to a perceived need for municipalities to have controlled, efficient, one-way or targeted channels for information dissemination, distinct from the open and potentially less controllable environment of

mainstream social media. This highlights the potential divergence between platforms designed for broad social media and those tailored to specifically deliver information from government to citizens, even if municipal actors sometimes conceptually merge them.

In addressing RQ2 concerning communication content, our findings reveal a clear predominance of informational and promotional objectives over dialogical ones. Municipalities primarily use social media to achieve speed and efficiency in communication to ensure that citizens are widely informed and to promote community life and events (Table 3). This corresponds closely with the public information model of public relations (Grunig & Hunt, 1984) which emphasizes the dissemination of objective (or organizationally framed) information. The significant presence of content related to the development and maintenance of the city and the promotion of events (Table 5) also includes elements of public relations and a potentially asymmetrical PR model with the aim of building a positive image and showcasing the achievements of the municipality. While the potential for interaction and feedback was mentioned by some questionnaire respondents (Table 3), thematic analysis of MEPs' Facebook posts (Table 5) showed limited evidence of content explicitly designed to promote discussion or co-creation, suggesting that the dialogic potential of social media (Kent & Taylor, 2002) remains largely untapped in practice.

RQ3 and RQ4 sought to understand the key motivations and barriers shaping social media use and the results provide essential context for both adoption patterns and communication styles. Resource constraints directly explain low adoption among smaller communities. Fear of "negative comments," uncontrolled discussions, and reputational damage represent a strong psychological and organizational barrier. This resonates with theories of risk perception (Slovic, 2000) where the perceived negative consequences of online interaction (conflict resolution burden, public criticism) outweigh the perceived benefits for many municipal actors. This fear likely contributes to a preference for safer, one-way communication styles and hinders the adoption of more open, dialogic approaches, consistent with findings on organizational tendencies toward control in uncertain online environments (Baltz, 2023; Evans et al., 2018). Beyond resource constraints, our qualitative evidence highlights the TOE "environment" dimension. Many officials referred to a diffuse legitimacy pressure ("the times demand it," "citizens expect it") that pushes them online even when direct functional gains are modest.

A comparison of the stated objectives (RQ3) with the observed communication content of the MEPs (RQ2) reveals both congruence and tension. The strong emphasis on information delivery and event promotion is reflected in the dominant content themes. However, the stated goal of enabling interaction and feedback appears less translated into practice, as content rarely includes explicit calls for discussion or engagement. This gap may stem from the aforementioned resource constraints (managing interaction is time-consuming) or the pervasive fear of negativity, leading to a default setting to a safer, broadcast style of communication. Moreover, the perceived risks associated with negativity (RQ4) seem to actively shape the type of communication in which municipalities engage, favoring controlled dissemination of information over potentially contentious dialogue. This reveals the central "democratic dilemma" of modern local government. On the one hand, platforms like Facebook create public expectations of greater transparency and citizen engagement. On the other, however, the very openness of these platforms combined with limited municipal resources and fears of negativity push local governments towards a controlled, one-way flow of information, leaving the dialogic potential of social media largely untapped.

As elaborated in the methodology and confirmed by the results of the questionnaire regarding barriers (RQ4), effective social media management requires significant resources—dedicated staff time, specific digital communication skills, funding for potential promotion or tools, and strategic oversight. Larger municipalities inherently have better access to these resources, allowing them to adopt and maintain a visible presence on platforms like Facebook. In contrast, the smallest municipalities, often operating with minimal staff and budget, face significant constraints, making social media management a perceived luxury rather than a basic necessity. This reveals an institutional digital divide within the Czech local government system where a lack of resources structurally limits the capacity of a huge number of smaller municipalities to engage through these widespread digital channels. This goes beyond mere technological access and points to underlying inequalities in administrative capacity.

This institutional digital divide affects not only the presence of municipalities on social media but also the type of content they produce. Fear of negativity and lack of capacity to moderate complex online discussions, key barriers for smaller municipalities (RQ4), logically lead to a preference for controlled communication. The result is often symbolic adoption—digital presence is introduced to meet demands for legitimacy, but the communication strategy itself remains conservative and unidirectional to minimize risk. Moreover, this preference suggests path dependency: smaller municipalities may continue using their established communication channels (bulletin boards, local radio, personal contacts) that have served them adequately for decades. This is consistent with findings that much of government use of social media is not devoted to democratic dialogue but to symbolic acts and self-presentation—activities designed to build a positive image in a low-risk environment (DePaula et al., 2018). Thus, the "luxury" of social media management is not just having a profile but having the resources to move beyond safe, one-way messaging.

This institutional digital divide extends beyond administrative capacity to democratic advocacy itself. Without social media presence, smaller municipalities face systematic disadvantages in mobilizing citizens, building coalitions, and gaining visibility in policy debates including those concerning their own future through potential amalgamation. This represents a digital manifestation of classical modernization patterns: While traditional oral communication networks served rural communities adequately for local governance, contemporary political advocacy increasingly requires digital platforms to reach audiences and influence policy. The concentration of social media adoption in larger municipalities thus reinforces urban-rural power asymmetries, creating a self-perpetuating cycle where digital capability determines political voice, a pattern likely extending across Europe's fragmented local government systems.

6. Limitations and Future Research

This study, although comprehensive, has several limitations that should be mentioned. First, the proxy method for mapping Facebook presence, while validated, likely slightly underestimates true prevalence and cannot capture the level of activity or engagement on the identified pages. Second, the questionnaire survey, although national, achieved a response rate of only 5.3%, raising concerns about potential non-response bias. It is possible that municipalities with a greater interest in or activity on social media were more likely to respond which may have biased findings on motivations and use of platforms towards a more positive picture than exists across all municipalities. Third, the thematic analysis, while providing depth, was limited to the MEPs and a single month (January 2025). Findings related to communication content and style may not be fully generalizable to smaller municipalities or applicable to times of crisis or elections. In addition,

sampling only five posts per MEP may not have captured the full spectrum of their communication. Fourth and finally, the study focused exclusively on the perspective of the municipalities (senders) and lacked data on citizens' perceptions or quantitative engagement metrics (such as likes, comments, or shares), which are key indicators of the true impact of communication and an important direction for future research.

7. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study provides a multifaceted analysis of social media use by Czech municipalities revealing an environment strongly shaped by differences in size and resources. While larger municipalities have generally adopted Facebook, primarily for information dissemination and promotion, often balancing public service with PR objectives, smaller municipalities lag significantly behind, constrained by a lack of capacity and concerns about online negativity. Facebook dominates the social media sphere but specialized municipal communication tools also play a noticeable role, underscoring the focus on controlled information delivery. Overall, the potential of social media to promote genuine dialogue and participation remains largely untapped. Addressing the institutional digital divide and equipping municipalities, especially smaller ones, with the necessary resources, skills, and strategic leadership to navigate the complexities of online communication is a key challenge for strengthening local governance and democratic engagement in the Czech Republic's digital future.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank the anonymous reviewers for their insightful feedback and constructive suggestions, which significantly improved the quality of this manuscript.

Funding

This work was supported by the BETTER Life project (Bringing Excellence to Transformative Socially Engaged Research in Life Sciences through Integrated Digital Centers) funded by the European Union (Horizon Europe; grant agreement No 101071314). Views and opinions expressed are, however, those of the authors only and do not necessarily reflect those of the European Union or the European Research Executive Agency (REA). Neither the European Union nor the granting authority can be held responsible for them.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Supplementary Material

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

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10354
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10354

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

A Mixed-Method Approach to Evaluating Citizen Engagement on Government Social-Media Pages

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Submitted: 17 March 2025 **Accepted:** 24 June 2025 **Published:** 7 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

In their communication on social media, most organizations consider engagement as a core objective. In the public sector, a vast majority of contributions have studied citizen engagement through metrics such as post reactions, comments, and shares. In this article, we prefer another approach in seeking to understand both the perceptions and practices of engagement management and evaluation from the municipalities' point of view. We combine qualitative and quantitative data stemming mostly from communication managers in Nordic countries. Qualitative insights come from interviews conducted with these managers (N = 19) in Spring and Summer of 2024. Quantitative data come from a survey distributed to the communication managers of all Nordic municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants (N = 525) in early 2025. Our findings show high heterogeneity in monitoring and evaluation of engagement; a focus on the metrics provided by social-media platforms, as well as content; and the importance of the quality of state–citizen exchanges. These findings call for a refined, qualitative approach to engagement on government social-media pages that goes beyond the metrics that are almost always used as a starting point in previous research.

Keywords

citizen engagement; engagement evaluation; engagement monitoring; municipalities communication; Nordic countries; public sector; social media

1. Introduction

In the public sector, the perceived value of new information and communication technologies in facilitating communication with citizens has led to the widespread adoption of online channels. Many public

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organizations have integrated social media into their communication strategies to leverage their advantages, particularly the ability to lower barriers to citizen engagement. Social media are defined as "technologies that facilitate social interaction, make possible collaboration, and enable deliberation across stakeholders" (Bryer & Zavattaro, 2011, p. 327). Their features are particularly relevant for fostering citizen participation in policy- and decision-making processes. This engagement is crucial for governments, as they increasingly prioritize interactions that enhance public service delivery, strengthen civic participation (Manetti et al., 2017), and build citizen trust. Social media offer opportunities to reduce information asymmetry and to overcome the limitations of traditional top-down communication between citizens and public bodies (Bonsón et al., 2017). Prior research has recognized their potential to establish a dialogic, bidirectional relationship with the public, thereby improving state-citizen interactions and fostering greater democratic engagement. In this case, democratic engagement is defined as individuals and groups' participation in democratic processes, including voting, public deliberation, and involvement in societal issues (Kahne et al., 2016).

Numerous articles have been published about social-media adoption and use in public bodies. However, the theory regarding citizen engagement needs further development, as engagement has been mostly measured as a dependent variable and rarely considered from the communication managers' perspective. This is especially the case in Nordic countries, where most contributions have focused on political communication (private, personal messages shared by politicians), and not on public organizations disseminating official and neutral information under a strict legal framework (see Pasquier & Villeneuve, 2018). Our article aims to fill this gap by exploring the situation in Nordic municipalities. Here, municipalities are considered as administrative and not political units: We gather data from communication managers in their administrative capacity and look at social-media communication on official municipal accounts. We adopt a mixed-method approach, starting with interviews in order to understand how municipalities conceive, implement, and evaluate engagement. This makes a first contribution to the literature on social-media communication, augmented by a survey distributed to all municipalities that builds on these qualitative insights. This approach allows us to go beyond the focus on metrics—reactions, comments, shares—used in prior research (e.g., Bonsón & Ratkai, 2013; Bonsón et al., 2017). Against this background, our article aims to respond to the following research questions (RQs):

RQ1: What are municipalities' strategies to foster citizen engagement on social media?

RQ2: And how do municipalities measure and assess citizen engagement on social media?

Responding to these RQs serves a double purpose. First, it encourages scholars to prefer a broad definition of engagement, too often regarded as a narrow measurement that is not relevant in a public-sector context. Public organizations often regard social media as an opportunity to create and maintain relationships with citizens via information exchange and enhanced transparency (S. Khan et al., 2021). This perspective differs significantly from the accumulation of financial benefits based on views (stimulated by reactions, comments, and shares). Second, it refines our approach to citizen engagement strategies, often connected to institutional and content-related factors. We investigate the effects of individual and organizational variables, which can't be fully captured through the analysis of content and metrics.

Section 2 describes how social-media use and engagement have been addressed previously. Section 3 relates to the context of our study, presenting prior contributions on the Nordic region and key figures regarding

social-media use. Then, we depict the methodology, emphasizing the importance of applying a mixed-method approach, followed by the findings. Section 6 and 7 expose the limitations, discuss our results, and propose paths for future studies.

2. Theoretical Considerations

The growing presence of governments on social media has sparked increasing interest in these channels. Their ability to facilitate interactions and deliver timely information explains the enthusiasm surrounding these platforms (Mabillard et al., 2024). Consequently, most public administrations have progressively integrated social media into their communication strategies. This evolution has led to the development of research on social-media use in the public sector. In what follows, we present the key theoretical approaches used in the literature, define the most central and relevant concepts to our study, and review key contributions on usage patterns and determining factors, before examining citizen engagement specifically.

2.1. Governments' Use of Social Media

The reasons underlying the adoption of social media often echoed government-communication plans. Kavanaugh et al. (2012) stated that establishing new communication patterns was a great expectation among public administrations on social media. This relates partly to reaching new audiences and targeting specific groups, especially in particular circumstances (e.g., the most vulnerable people during crises). Brainard and Edlins (2015) showed that social media could help governments build social capital and foster a shared sense of purpose through citizen engagement. For G. F. Khan (2017), collecting feedback helped governments understand citizen perceptions about policies and can potentially improve policies and services. However, while social media offered opportunities for gathering reactions and comments, they also provided public organizations with the ability to reply, enabling them to "address citizen concerns and mitigate negative feelings and comments" (Graham, 2014, p. 372).

Additionally, Chatfield and Reddick (2018) argued that social media could help change the "single-loop" model of communication management (focusing on efficient service delivery via a top-down approach) towards citizen participation. In this case, citizen participation is considered as participation in the planning and administrative processes of government (Callahan, 2007), involving a "double-loop" dynamic about citizen desires and suggestions for improving the delivery of public services (Reddick et al., 2017). Gálvez-Rodríguez et al. (2018, p. 267) wrote that internet use should promote the "exchange of ideas and opinions, in which the parties in a relationship engage in an honest, open, ethically-based give and take" and that "organizations should implement communication strategies aimed at increasing stakeholder engagement, in order to achieve better mutual understanding and greater opportunities for fruitful communication."

From a theoretical perspective, governments' use of social media, and engagement in particular, has been connected to the improvement of inter-stakeholder relationships. Regarding citizens specifically, Margetts and Dunleavy (2013) have insisted on the necessity to develop holistic strategies to favor joined-up, citizen-centric services, as part of their reflection around "digital-era governance." Another theoretical approach is the "smart-governance" paradigm, according to which solving complex problems involves participatory and co-production strategies with citizens. Public administrations must consider citizens as active agents rather than passive

customers and work closely with them to reach satisfactory and legitimate policy solutions that also add public value (Criado & Gil-Garcia, 2019).

From an empirical perspective, studies have mostly captured social-media use via the number of posts published by governments. Typically treating use as the dependent variable, they have shown the effect of various explanatory factors. For instance, in Italy and Spain, Guillamón et al. (2016) highlighted the influence of user participation, population size, and citizen income on information diffusion. Demographic and social factors were also identified in Portugal by Silva et al. (2019), who complemented these findings with the role played by political incentives, and local political competition in particular. In Austria and Switzerland, Bhatia and Mabillard (2022) found a strong, significant effect of municipal-population size on social-media use. They also found that intense activity on one platform, especially Instagram, had a significant effect on municipalities' activity on Facebook and X (ex-Twitter). Finally, the analysis of mayors' characteristics on social-media use led to mixed evidence in the literature: In Italy, Raimo et al. (2024) presented contrasting results depending on the platform used. While mayor gender was significantly linked with Facebook and Instagram use (female mayors tended to use these platforms more than their male counterparts), this relationship was not significant on YouTube. In contrast, the effect of mayors' education level on use was significant in the case of Facebook and YouTube. A complete list of the determinants of social-media use was recently presented by Padeiro et al. (2021) in their study of Portuguese municipalities' communication during the Covid-19 pandemic. They tested the effect of 20 variables related to the "socio-spatial" (context-related factors), "institutional" (e.g., municipal resources), and "epidemiological" (e.g., health-related factors) environment on the volume of posts. In addition to the role played by sociodemographic features (especially income), they emphasized the influence of municipal autonomy on social-media use.

Prior research has, however, shown that public administrations have not yet fully capitalized on social-media properties (Marino & Lo Presti, 2018), since they often use these platforms to disseminate information. This "dissemination by default" strategy often lacks a clear purpose. For instance, Jungblut and Jungblut (2022) found that the German police rarely used X to gather information or improve public relations; in contrast, disseminating information was often the norm. Mansoor (2021) underlined that while governments increasingly used social media during crises like Covid-19, many still used these platforms for one-way communication rather than for fostering citizen engagement. In previous research, the analysis of engagement mostly relied on characteristics of posts and interactions, as developed in Section 2.2.

2.2. Citizen Engagement on Government Social-Media Pages

For public organizations, engagement is deemed essential for increasing transparency and participation, and is often presented as their main objective on social media. For McNutt (2014), the shift from a "broadcast" to a "communicative" paradigm linked to Web 2.0 tools, including social media, should foster citizen participation. However, public organizations have regularly failed to achieve this goal. This situation raised the interest of numerous researchers, whose contributions focused specifically on the drivers of citizen engagement. For example, a meta-analysis conducted by Contri et al. (2025) found that photos generated more engagement because of their eye-catching nature, various content topics influenced engagement, timing increased post visibility, and communication intensity had little impact on engagement. Contributions highlighting these aspects in the literature came from various disciplines.

From a communication perspective, the literature has underlined social media's potential for developing interactions, and the fact that posts related to government competences and political activity may foster more engagement than others (Paiva Dias, 2022). Dobija et al. (2023) distinguished passive from participatory communication, based on the respective influence of textual (e.g., readability) and intertextual (e.g., hashtags) connectivity. Focusing on the Covid-19 crisis, they highlighted that passive communications elicited more engagement than what is usually advanced in the literature. From a management perspective, several contributions showed that posting frequency had no significant effect on engagement; in contrast, the timing of posts did (Metallo et al., 2020). Consequently, any strategic communication should include volume but also additional factors such as message quality, content relevance for users, emotional resonance, etc. For Bonsón et al. (2017), effective and interactive participation depended on individual public administrations, since they may behave as either neutral or dynamic advocates of citizen participation.

While social media aroused great enthusiasm, in practice, there was no evidence that citizens generally use social media for interaction purposes (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). One reason pertained to context: Bonsón et al. (2015) showed that engagement rates varied from one region to another (they are higher in Nordic and Southern European municipalities than in Anglo-Saxon and Germanic municipalities). Another reason related to platforms: Henisa and Wilantika's (2021) findings revealed that Instagram was the most engaging channel. Finally, research also showed that most governments preferred dissemination over interactivity; this did not strongly encourage citizen engagement.

However, previous research has mostly preferred a quantitative point of view, relying on metrics directly retrieved from social-media platforms, using Bonsón and Ratkai's (2013) calculation of engagement: the sum of popularity (reactions, such as likes), commitment (comments), and virality (shares). Going beyond this perspective, we focus on an under-studied aspect of engagement: the production conditions of posts published by public administrations. This aspect, often neglected, will enrich the literature with engagement-related insights that will capture considerations other than those reflected in the abovementioned metrics. These metrics only highlight public administrations' capacity to generate reactions, comments, and shares, as if it were the sole objective of their communication on social media.

The focus on social-media platforms has often ignored the role played by users in the state-citizen relationship. Most studies have used metrics as the dependent variable. To the extent of our knowledge, only a few contributions have investigated how government (frontline personnel in Stone et al., 2024) and citizens (Wang et al., 2025, in emergency situations) envisaged engagement on social media. We address this issue by focusing on communication managers' perceptions of social-media use and engagement and the corresponding strategies implemented in municipalities. To do so, we used a mixed-method approach, as detailed in Section 3.

3. Methodology

As mentioned earlier, this article goes beyond quantitative metrics to offer a more nuanced understanding of citizen engagement. To achieve this, we have adopted a mixed-method approach. For Belardinelli and Mele (2020), mixed-method approaches belong to pragmatist methodologies, combining different methods to collect and analyze data. We preferred a sequential-qualitative first process, starting with the collection of insights from interviews, followed by a survey that builds on these insights. Concretely, we interviewed

communication managers from selected Nordic municipalities to make themes emerge from their practice regarding social-media engagement (the interview guide is available in Supplementary File, Appendix 2). We followed this by distributing a survey to the communication managers of all 525 Nordic municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants. This strategy (Figure 1) is central for researchers who want "to build, supplement, and/or interpret qualitative findings with additional quantitative data" (Creswell, 2009, p. 195). As this aligned with our article's objective, we preferred this sequential exploratory strategy.

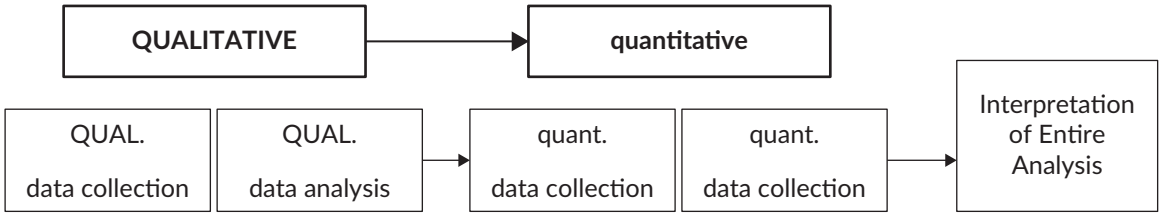


Figure 1. Sequential exploratory strategy. Note: Capitalization indicates a weight or priority on the quantitative or qualitative phase in the analysis. Source: Creswell (2009).

We selected all municipalities with over 10,000 inhabitants, a threshold used in other studies (e.g., Mabillard et al., 2021). Prior research (e.g., Lovari & Materassi, 2021; Perea et al., 2021) focused on large municipalities for various reasons including their systematic presence on social media, intense activity, and, more generally, greater likelihood of interacting with citizens on social media compared to small municipalities. Using this threshold also allows for international comparison. The creation of categories led to the selection of interviews based on population range. After a first round of email invitations, we sent reminders and secured 19 positive replies. The list of interviewees covered all countries, although the number of respondents varied between population categories (Table 1). Conducted in early 2024 using Microsoft Teams, the semi-structured interviews lasted between 39 and 92 minutes (average: 64 minutes). They consisted of open-ended questions based on our RQs. The interview grid was enriched with new information gathered during the interviews, offering opportunities for various themes to develop (Harvey-Jordan & Long, 2001). We sorted these themes through the data-coding process. Interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim using Notta (https://www.notta.ai/en). Each transcription was then checked for accuracy. Quotations from interviewees were sometimes slightly edited to guarantee anonymity.

Data analysis started immediately after each interview. Thematic analysis served to separate conventional themes and identify innovative ideas emerging from the interviews. We used NVivo (https://lumivero.com/products/nvivo) to code the transcriptions; the data-driven process relied on the evolution of a node structure, based on words and expressions raised by the interviewees. We then organized the codes, created inductively, in emerging themes that aligned with our RQs. During the coding process, new themes did not emerge after the 19th interview, reaching code saturation (Hennink et al., 2017).

To further explore the themes identified in the qualitative phase, we designed a survey (see Appendix 1 in the Supplementary File) based on the previously established codes. This survey was aimed at deepening our understanding of how these themes applied to municipalities, how they were perceived, and their potential challenges. We structured the survey in three main parts. The first includes questions about the strategy and management challenges linked to social-media use in municipalities, the type of platforms used, and the main communication goals, as well as planning issues. The second focuses on citizen engagement, in line with our RQs. It includes questions on reactions to users' comments, the evaluation of engagement, and the type

Table 1. List of interviewees and survey respondents, by country and population category.

Country	Population range	Sample size	Interviewees	Respondents' designation	Survey respondents (complete replies)
Sweden	10,000–19,999	92	0	–	11
	20,000–49,999	74	2	R1, R2	5
	50,000–99,999	31	4	R3–R6	5
	≥100,000	19	1	R7	4
Denmark	10,000–19,999	5	0	–	0
	20,000–49,999	49	1	R8	16
	50,000–99,999	32	2	R9, R10	6
	≥100,000	8	1	R11	3
Finland	10,000–19,999	43	0	–	7
	20,000–49,999	33	0	–	5
	50,000–99,999	12	0	–	3
	≥100,000	9	2	R12, R13	2
Norway	10,000–19,999	45	2	R14, R15	8
	20,000–49,999	45	1	R16	10
	50,000–99,999	13	1	R17	3
	≥100,000	7	1	R18	1
Iceland	10,000–19,999	4	0	–	1
	20,000–49,999	3	1	R19	1
	50,000–99,999	0	0	–	0
	≥100,000	1	0	–	1
	Total	525	19	19	92

of measurement used. The third includes questions about the responsibilities of communication managers regarding social-media use and management.

We distributed the survey via email to all communication managers, allowing us to collect data that would support and complement the key qualitative findings. Data treatment started right after the survey's closure. Out of the 525 invitations and reminders sent, we received 119 responses (22.67%), of which 92 (17.52%) were either fully or partially complete (but with a completion rate that made these replies usable). Out of these 92 replies, 69 respondents stated that their municipality assesses citizen engagement on social media. Because of the small size and non-representativity of our sample, we preferred to augment the qualitative insights with descriptive statistics.

4. Context

The Nordic region is of particular interest for research on social media, since its countries are among the European states with the highest proportion of internet users (Nordicom, n.d.). Regarding social media, usage rates vary much more than internet use. Here, we display figures regarding social-media use by Nordic municipalities on the most popular platforms among governments: Facebook, X, and Instagram (Figure 2). Facebook is the most popular platform (registration rate: 99%), followed by Instagram (88%) and X (56%). This is quite high in international comparison: For example, Zumofen et al. (2023) have found significantly lower registration rates in Central and Eastern Europe.

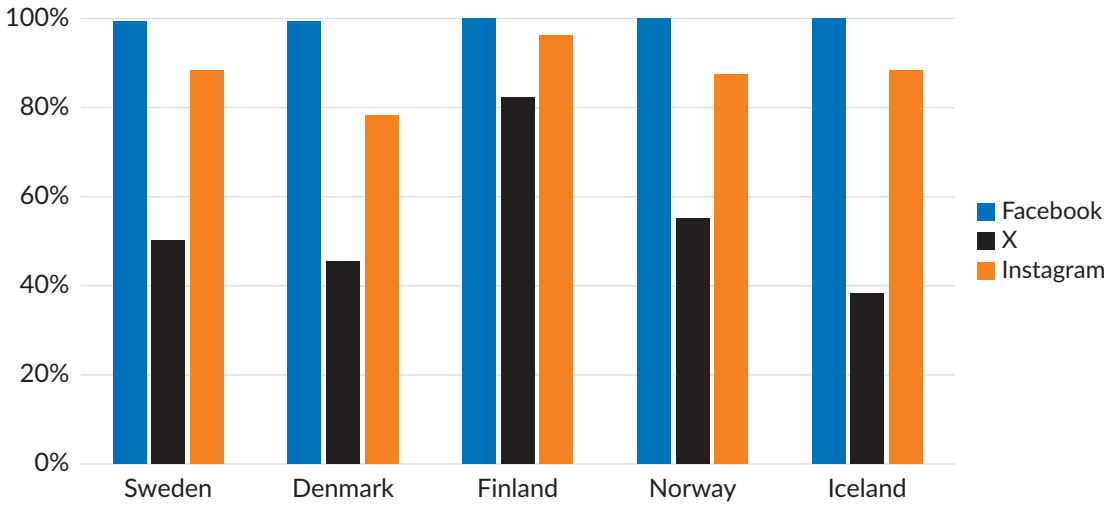


Figure 2. Number of registered accounts by country and platform (end of 2023), in percentages.

Based on the metrics of Bonsón and Ratkai (2013), Instagram is the platform with the highest levels of engagement in the Nordic countries as of late 2023 (Table 2). The cross-country comparison reveals that while some municipalities in Finland and Sweden are very active, median values are quite high in the whole sample. This finding indicates sustained activity on Instagram in all countries. The data show significant differences between Facebook and X, in line with the difference between the two in terms of popularity (registration).

Table 2. Engagement in active municipalities (September 1–November 30, 2023).

	Facebook			X			Instagram		
	Min.	Max.	Median	Min.	Max.	Median	Min.	Max.	Median
Sweden	1.33	44.71	9.24	0.07	0.09	0.08	5.05	280.05	26.34
Denmark	1.26	34.60	7.71	0.22	29.09	1.79	4.61	56.18	17.71
Finland	1.10	17.26	4.88	0.06	32.09	1.63	3.01	217.66	20.68
Norway	1.30	33.72	5.01	0.09	0.85	0.23	4.70	71.05	17.64
Iceland	1.66	5.52	3.04	2.19	2.90	2.54	13.25	35.50	18.64

Despite the high figures shown in Figure 2 and Table 2 (in international comparison), studies specifically focusing on social-media use by public administrations and on citizen engagement in Nordic municipalities remain relatively limited, although a few notable contributions do exist. They include Klang and Nolin's (2011) study of social-media policies in 26 Swedish municipalities, Bellström et al.'s (2016) focus on state-citizen exchanges in only one municipality, and Baltz's (2023) investigation of municipal communication on social media. In line with previous research, Baltz (2023) confirmed that Swedish municipalities still preferred information dissemination over interactivity. Nielsen and Salomonsen (2012) analyzed the institutional perspective in strategic communication in Danish local governments, showing how normative and mimetic institutional pressures occur. Other contributions, such as Lockert et al.'s (2019) and Wæraas et al.'s (2015), focused more on reputation building and reform strategies at the local level in Denmark or Norway. They discussed how administrative actors were likely to cultivate different types of reputation strategies depending on the size of the municipality and the type of actors involved. Finally, other studies mostly focused on neighboring topics. They addressed, for instance, the relationship with media use

in Norway (Wold, 2022) and the effects of social networks on volunteering during the Covid-19 crisis in Denmark (Carlsen et al., 2021).

5. Findings

5.1. Tailoring Content to Platforms and Target Groups

As highlighted during the interviews, one of the main strategies deployed by Nordic municipalities to engage with citizens is to tailor content to specific audience groups (e.g., young population). Targeted content and demographic segmentation ensure that different age groups effectively receive different messages. Older demographics are typically reached on Facebook, while younger adults engage actively on Instagram, and teenagers prefer TikTok. By differentiating content based on the platforms used, municipalities can ensure that messages resonate with the targeted groups. The aim is to maximize interaction and citizen participation:

> And then we have those channel-based KPIs, like how we measure the goal on Facebook, the reach of the people aged over 65 increases, and on Instagram the reach of the people aged 17 to 24 increases. So, we wanted the reach of the people targeted to increase. And every month we also do a couple of posts that are planned beforehand to engage especially those targeted age groups for those channels. (R12)

Beyond segmentation, most interviewees reported that they also adjusted the way they communicate to appear approachable and relatable. Using accessible and friendly language helps create a strong connection with citizens. Instead of relying on a bureaucratic or formal tone, many municipalities adopt a conversational style to foster familiarity and trust. Some even use humor and informal expressions to make their posts engaging, ensuring that communication is not only informative but also enjoyable for the audience. This shift in tone has been reinforced by the use of visual cues like emojis, which have become a key component in social-media engagement. They help convey emotions, clarify intent, and make posts visually appealing. However, municipalities must strike a balance between using emojis to humanize their communication and maintaining their professional image. A consistent visual approach ensures that citizens recognize official communications while feeling that their municipality is approachable and responsive:

> And now we have a much softer tone, a little more “we’re friends” tone, and sometimes with a bit of humor. It’s good. Of course, it’s because we want people to like and follow us. So, we have to adjust the tone in the channel. We also use emojis sometimes, but we have noticed that if we use a lot of emojis, the reach is smaller. (R2)

Another powerful engagement tactic mentioned by Nordic municipalities is to encourage public interaction through open questions or polls. This stimulates reflection and conversation, encouraging citizens to share their opinions. Using social media as a participatory tool also helps municipalities better understand public sentiment (while making citizens feel heard), gather input on projects, and reach a broad audience (beyond traditional town-hall meetings). Through surveys and polls, municipalities may gather insights from residents not attending in-person consultations.

Turning to our survey, these elements align with the overall majority of replies that we collected, as most municipalities valued responsiveness and interactivity. Out of the 69 municipalities that measured and assessed citizen engagement on social media, only four (5.80%) and 13 (18.84%) found that being responsive and interactive, respectively, was "not important" or "not important at all." However, these numbers are even lower for awareness: Only one municipality found it to be not important. This means that increasing awareness through information diffusion remains central for most municipalities. Finally, increasing trust via exchanges with citizens on social media was raised by most municipalities as a key objective (only seven [10.14%] municipalities found it "not important" or "not important at all").

5.2. Leveraging Visual Content and Local Stories to Generate Engagement

Most interviewees emphasized the importance of content types for generating high engagement. Visual content and local stories, especially through photos and videos, were found to be compelling since they capture attention more quickly than text posts. Municipalities leverage social-media stories and user-generated content to showcase community life, promote local businesses, and advertise public events. This approach not only increases engagement but also strengthens the sense of community, making residents feel more connected to their municipality:

> But then what we have been thinking is just that we have to share beautiful photos from our municipality with the posts….Sometimes it's a festival in some school or something. Then we go there first, and then we share it afterwards. (R19)

Another important approach is integrating citizens into municipal communication. Rather than relying solely on top-down messaging, some municipalities actively involve residents in content creation. Featuring community members in posts adds authenticity and fosters a sense of shared ownership. Finally, municipalities encourage direct person-to-person interactions, on a regular basis, rather than impersonal institutional messaging to maintain engagement. This presupposes that municipalities respond frequently and react to citizens' inputs (e.g., questions) on their pages.

In this sense, our survey shows that 67 municipalities (97.10%) react to comments. Twenty-seven (39.13%) react selectively, when users require clarification or address critical issues; 14 (20.29%) actively monitor posts and remove posts that violate their social-media policies; and 26 (37.68%) react systematically. Additionally, almost two-thirds (41 out of 69, 59.42%) of the municipalities evaluate their activity, including the monitoring of state-citizen exchanges and engagement, at least once a month. Twenty-four municipalities (34.78%) conduct this evaluation at least once a week, with half of them (17.39%) making this effort on a daily basis.

5.3. Heterogeneous Measurement and Assessment Practices

Interviewees defined engagement through various indicators, including likes, shares, comments, reach, and follower growth. Many municipalities track these indicators to determine the effectiveness of their communication strategy. Some prioritize followers and their retention rate, recognizing that losing followers could indicate a disconnect between content and the public's interest. Others consider the reach of posts as a crucial metric, understanding that posts with fewer interactions can be valuable if they reach the right

audience. Additionally, measuring citizen engagement based on interactions, relative to the number of followers, offers insights into the relevance of social-media content:

> Reach is the most important thing. And that's just my opinion, because it's hard to know which one of them, but I think reach is often based on how many likes, how many comments, how much engagement you have got. And I think sometimes we hear this thing that this post only reached like 1,000 people, but it was the 1,000 right people. (R9)

Some municipalities also assess the type and sentiment of engagement. Rather than focusing solely on the number of interactions, they analyze whether comments are positive, neutral, or negative. The use of emojis and reactions, such as "happy" or "angry," helps understand citizen perceptions. For certain municipalities, qualitative aspects of engagement are considered just as important as numerical data since they allow them to refine their messaging strategies to better align with citizens' expectations.

Results from our survey confirm this heterogeneity of practices highlighted in the interviews. When asked about the type of engagement evaluation preferred in their municipality, respondents pointed to a wide range of approaches. For 53 (77.94%) of them, metrics provided by social media are used most of the time or always; 47 (68.11%) of them look at engagement from a content-type point of view most of the time or always. In contrast, most of them more rarely evaluate engagement based on the number, type, and quality of exchanges on their pages (see Table 3).

Table 3. Preferred approaches to engagement evaluation on social media.

	How do you evaluate citizen engagement on your social-media pages?—We look at:				
	Engagement based on metrics (e.g., likes)	Engagement based on content type	The quality of our exchanges with users	The number of exchanges with users	The type of content shared between users
Never	0 (0%)	2 (2.90%)	6 (8.82%)	7 (10.29%)	9 (13.24%)
Sometimes	12 (17.65%)	12 (17.39%)	20 (29.41%)	23 (33.82%)	16 (23.53%)
About half of the time	3 (4.41%)	8 (11.59%)	11 (16.18%)	6 (8.82%)	12 (17.65%)
Most of the time	32 (47.06%)	26 (37.68%)	17 (25.00%)	18 (26.47%)	18 (26.47%)
Always	21 (30.88%)	21 (30.43%)	14 (20.59%)	14 (20.59%)	13 (19.12%)
N	68	69	68	68	68

5.4. Measuring Engagement Remains a Challenge

According to most interviewees, municipalities use a mix of built-in platform tools and third-party software to analyze social-media engagement. Many rely on Meta Business Suite for Facebook and Instagram, as well as TikTok's in-platform analytics, to gather statistics on engagement. These tools provide insights into impressions, audience demographics, and the performance of specific content. Some municipalities use external software (such as Hootsuite or Sprout Social) for comprehensive tracking, producing monthly reports with trends and comparisons. Others use external agencies or specialized analytics platforms to supplement internal data collection. These agencies conduct long-term assessments, typically on a quarterly basis, to provide a broader perspective on engagement trends.

Data from our survey indicate that monitoring tools provided by social-media platforms are dominant in engagement evaluation (59 out of 69 municipalities, 85.51%). Seventeen municipalities (24.64%) use additional software to analyze engagement, combined with social-media tools in 13 cases (1884%). The survey confirms the dominance of these two approaches, with only 5 municipalities (7.25%) evaluating citizen engagement manually. In most cases, municipalities focus on specific engagement indicators; only 16 of them (23.19%) envisage engagement in all its dimensions, through a global overview of post quality, reactions, content, etc.

Most interviewees also reported that despite the availability of tools, measuring engagement remained a challenge due to the evolving nature of social-media algorithms and shifting user behaviors. One primary difficulty is distinguishing between genuine engagement and passive interaction. For example, a post with high reach but few comments may be considered successful if it conveys essential information effectively. Conversely, a post with numerous likes and shares may not necessarily reflect meaningful civic participation:

> It depends much on the content. If it's content that we want engagement on, then we pay more attention, maybe to if we want, if we think, okay, here we're trying to get people to interact in comments, then that matters more. But if it's just information, then we're more like okay, how far can we reach? (R18)

Another challenge lies in benchmarking performance. While some municipalities set specific numerical goals such as increasing followers or achieving a particular engagement rate, others find it difficult to establish clear targets. Engagement is often content-dependent; municipalities recognize that posts designed to inform (e.g., policy updates) may generate less interaction than those aimed at sparking discussions (e.g., local events or polls). Consequently, municipalities must interpret engagement metrics within the broad context of their communication objectives.

The replies gathered through our survey corroborate these qualitative findings. They show that engagement is indeed assessed by municipalities across channels: 70% of respondents indicated that their municipality evaluates citizen engagement on various platforms and channels. Thus, evaluating engagement on social media exclusively is preferred by a minority of municipalities.

6. Discussion

Regarding RQ1, most Nordic municipalities combine diverse strategies to foster citizen engagement on social media. Adjusting tone and content, as already underlined by Faber (2022) in his study of Dutch municipalities, strategically using emojis, leveraging visual storytelling, and integrating citizens into municipal communication appear to be among the ways municipalities use to communicate as effectively as possible. By adopting a dynamic, accessible approach and tone, municipalities seek to strengthen their connection with residents and encourage greater participation. Similar results have been observed in Italian municipalities by Lovari and Parisi (2015). These strategies are perceived as aiming for interactions and engagement, as raised by most interviewees. In addition to these insights, survey respondents pointed to the importance of increasing interactivity and their responsiveness on social media. In this sense, respondents from almost all municipalities indicated that comments were addressed either selectively (e.g., to respond to questions, provide clarifications,

or address critical issues) or systematically. Another way to encourage public interaction was through open questions or polls, as observed by Jäntti and Kurkela (2021) in Finnish municipalities.

Regarding RQ2, both qualitative insights and quantitative data show that Nordic municipalities use various methods to measure and assess citizen engagement on social media. While built-in analytics tools provide baseline data on interactions, external software and manual tracking methods supplement these insights. This finding aligns with the qualitative insights presented above and, more generally, with the idea that social media should be part of a broad communication strategy. As explained by Pasquier and Villeneuve (2018), social media are often used jointly with other channels. Therefore, the assessment of citizen engagement should be part of a large, cross-channel effort, although social media offers specific tools to measure engagement (e.g., Agostino & Arnaboldi, 2016). However, the interpretation of engagement data remains complex, requiring municipalities to contextualize metrics within their communication objectives. Despite challenges such as algorithm changes, content variability, and changing citizen preferences, municipalities continue to adapt and refine their strategies based on data-driven insights. In this sense, survey respondents indicated that more than half of the municipalities used social-media metrics extensively, and mostly focused on the effects of post types; a little less than half of them focused on the number, quality, and type of exchanges between users on social-media pages.

7. Conclusion

Nordic municipalities employ various strategies to foster citizen engagement on social media, such as adjusting tone, using visual content and emojis, and encouraging interaction through comments, questions, and polls. They then use a mix of built-in analytics, external tools, and manual tracking to assess engagement, integrating these insights into broader communication strategies despite the challenges of interpreting metrics. Both interviews and the survey showed high heterogeneity in practices. Various reasons may explain this finding. One may relate to the high level of autonomy in local governments. In the local autonomy index developed by Ladner et al. (2025), the five Nordic countries rank in the top eight (out of 57 states), showing the high level of organizational autonomy and freedom enjoyed by municipalities. While this may explain the variations observed in our study, other reasons could pertain to the size of communication teams and political willingness to support engagement on social-media pages.

Unfortunately, the relatively small size of our sample and the prevalence of small municipalities in our survey respondents do not allow for a more advanced and robust statistical analysis. A higher number of replies in future studies may help reach a deeper understanding of the subject through an explanatory research design, based on a large sample. For instance, it would be interesting to test, in line with previous studies (see Contri et al., 2025), whether the trends observed in our article relate to specific patterns, such as municipalities' resources, population size, and socio-demographic characteristics of communication managers. While the threshold used in our study allows for international comparison, including small municipalities would also represent an interesting path for future research centered on Nordic countries since this region is characterized by specific urban-rural dynamics in local governance. Moreover, a comparison between the Nordic municipalities themselves would also be a promising path for research.

The methodology used here also presents limitations. First, we did not possess a full list of communication managers (no such document exists). And second, it was difficult to contact managers in a systematic way,

since structures, such as communication departments, may strongly vary from one case to another, and not all municipalities have a communication manager. We envisage these limitations as promising paths for future research. One suggestion would be to gather a large representative sample of respondents through a survey distributed to numerous municipalities (in populous countries). This would make it possible to use causal research, enabling researchers to test the determinants of engagement, based on both our qualitative insights and findings from prior studies. Another suggestion would be to delve into the political, organizational, and individual factors that impede the evaluation of citizen engagement on social media. Our survey showed that 25% of the municipalities (23 out of 92) neither measured nor monitored engagement on their social-media pages. Future research should also investigate citizen engagement in other contexts where, despite the universality of social-media potentialities, approaches to citizen engagement may differ strongly. Finally, future research should look into citizens' expectations, since they have been, somewhat paradoxically, largely neglected in previous analyses on engagement, although they are the "citizen" part of citizen engagement.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the HES-SO and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data are available from the authors upon request.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the author (unedited): Appendix 1 provides the interview guide and Appendix 2 the survey questions.

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10335
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10335

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Open Access Journal

Online Emotional Landscape of Government and Parliament Communication in Times of Crisis

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Submitted: 15 March 2025 **Accepted:** 12 June 2025 **Published:** 13 August 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

This study examines how social media users emotionally respond to Israeli politicians' messages during crises based on political alignment and crisis type. With Israel's frequent civic and military crises, the case study in this article aims to offer unique insights to scholars, practitioners, and the public invested in the intersection of online media, emotions, and crisis. To this end, we built a dataset of Facebook posts ($N = 25{,}000$) published by all active right, left, and center members of the Israeli parliament and government over a period of one year (November 2022–November 2023). We ensured that the dataset includes both routine and crisis periods, particularly the judicial reform unrest (civic crisis) and the Hamas–Israel war following the October 7 attack (military crisis). Our statistical analysis indicated two major trends in the dataset: (a) during the military crisis, emotional markers that were previously considered to correlate and cluster (sad and angry) are not merely different, as they stand in opposition to one another; (b) crisis periods, especially military, invite use of "edge" reactions, and see a significant increase in negative emotions, whereas routine times prompt more neutral or positive reactions. Reading the findings through the combination of affordances theory, mediatization theory, and the "template for emotions" concept, we suggest that social media may amplify negative reactions beyond politicians' influence, as the limited emotional spectrum offered on platforms might steer users to certain emotive responses, affecting risk management in crises. These insights call for decision-makers to consider the implications of emotional appeals and incentives on social media, especially during crises, to foster safer democratic public discourse.

Keywords

affordances; audience reactions; crisis; emotions and politics; Facebook; judicial reform; political communication

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1. Introduction

"You are more than welcome to be angry about it, I am angry too" (Lapid, 2024). This opening quotation is taken from Yair Lapid's Facebook post addressing the failure of the Israeli parliamentary opposition, led by him, to overthrow the government. The post refers to efforts made during the 2023 civic protest that took place across Israel in response to the government's push for judicial reform. In essence, political messages such as this represent the myriad ways emotions are infused into politicians' online communicative appeals to convey a political stance, legitimize negative or positive valence amongst the public, and mobilize civic participation through identification and affect. Considering the valuable work carried out by social and political scientists, the scarcity of studies on the unique intersection of emotions, online political communication, and crisis becomes evident, where less attention has been paid to the online emotional reactions of citizens to politicians' persuasion. This rare combination is at the heart of our study, as global political polarization, national and international crises, and ever-growing use in online media platforms all highlight the urgency to inquire into this formulation.

In the past two decades, political figures' use of social media has become a worldwide norm (Hofmann, 2019; Marland, 2018). While effective political communication in times of crisis has long been a sign of responsible leadership (Lay, 2002), a growing body of knowledge highlights new and disturbingly unprecedented threats to democratic societies in terms of technology and rhetoric. According to scholars in the field, much of the political discourse presented online nowadays propels negative emotional reactions in citizens (Bobba, 2019), allows for polarization and radicalization of society (Aslan, 2021; Tsuria & Yadlin-Segal, 2021), legitimizes rejection and exclusion of minorities and disenfranchised communities (Jost et al., 2020), and minimizes affective responses to crises (Kušen & Strembeck, 2021; Morosanu, 2020).

At the same time, the valuable knowledge regarding social media's impact on political communication and emotional political appeals mainly focuses on synchronous exploration of leaders rather than their followers (Ben-Ghiat, 2020). That is, studying the same crisis, at the same time, across the globe. Thus, diachronic scholarly knowledge about online political messaging and reactions is incomplete at best. That is, in one locality, through different crises over time. Specifically, it is unclear whether and how political alignment (right, center, and left) and crisis periods correlate with audience emotional reactions online. In this study, we aim to bridge this gap by examining the use of emotive political messages online in military crisis and civic crisis in one locality, Israel, over a period of one year.

2. Literature Review

To explore the relationship between online political messaging and emotional reactions in times of crisis, we first present a literature review pertinent to the meeting place of the three areas. The first section traces the scholarly discussions about the role of emotions in politics overall, explaining the evolving nature of the field from political expressions to public reactions. The second section narrows down the discussion and situates it in the field of political communication and, within it, the specific context of online communication platforms. Finally, the third section reviews the literature on emotional political appeals online, specifically in times of crisis. Throughout these three sections, we identify the scholarly gaps that must be met by a well-informed empirical exploration and establish this study's rationale, objectives, and significance.

2.1. The Role of Emotions in Politics and Political Communication

The status of emotions in political research is ambivalent. As reviewed in this section below, emotions are perceived as internally inconsistent, holding multiple, even contradicting, uses and meanings. Given that emotive messages play a critical role in various facets of the political landscape, their significance as drivers of public engagement, mobilization, and opinion-shaping requires ongoing exploration in empirical studies (Wolak & Sokhey, 2022). Historically, the study of emotions in political communication prioritized semi-objective elements, such as rhetorical structures and logical persuasion techniques, over the impact of emotion and the reception patterns of different audiences (Demertzis, 2006). Thus, Frevert and Pahl (2022, p. 3) argue that political scientists "have tended to neglect the intense and varied entanglement of politics and emotions."

Gustafsson and Hall (2021, p. 974) defined emotions as socially pronounced patterns where recognizable signifiers of feelings, such as anger and sadness, are communicated. Each emotion possesses a "logic" dictating "when, why, and how" it is felt and expressed, with associated implications and meanings. The expression of an emotion carries certain consequences or effects—influencing behavior, decision-making, or social interactions—that are shaped by the emotion's context and how it is understood and reacted to by others (Gustafsson & Hall, 2021). Thus, emotions are understood both as tools for conveying messages and as reactions to said messages, a system of intentions and meaning-making processes that is always relational, context-dependent, and in flux (Rosenwein, 2002, 2006). As Kotliar (2016) shows, emotions play a significant role in the pursuit and exercise of political power, attachment, and opposition. Being a complex system of social indicators, emotions are understood as internal and external to the individual, deep and shallow, somatic and cognitive, of mind and matter, simultaneously experienced individually and publicly mobilizing (Ahmed, 2004/2014; Denzin, 2017; Reddy, 2001; Yadlin-Segal, 2018; Zhang, 2022).

Hence, exploring emotions becomes a challenging task requiring time and place contextualization. Popular examples of the varying nature of emotive messages in politics range chronologically and geographically. From the use of pride and shame to affect citizens' anger and aggression in Adolf Hitler's speeches (Scheff & Retzinger, 1991); through communicating Chinese sentiments of enthusiasm towards change and revolution under Mao's leadership (Perry, 2002); confidence and hope in Roosevelt's *Fireside Chats* on the radio and fear in Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 television *Daisy* advertisement in the US (Amico, 2022; Ryfe, 2001); and all the way to blame in Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu's online messages to his electoral base (Mordechay & Yadlin, 2024). To situate emotions as an operationalizable variable, we explore two accepted principles within political communication.

First, one of the most well-accepted divisions in political science and communication, both online and offline, separates how politicians express emotions and how the public receives, feels, and ultimately acts upon them (Marcus, 2000; Selva, 2020). Second, researchers agree that while emotions can be fine-tuned differently in different contexts, all emotions necessitate collective, publicly expressed guidelines to be understood and mobilized. Frevert and Pahl (2022) name these guidelines "templates for emotions" that provide societies with a toolkit for feeling and navigating emotions in politics. Since collective understandings require the public sharing of these templates, media and communication outlets became crucial arenas for unpacking the interconnectedness of emotions and politics. Hence, data-driven projects,

such as the one presented here, must focus on the appeals and reactions in online-mediated political messages as a means for defining such templates.

The study of emotions in politics began to gain traction through the early works of Lazarsfeld et al. (1944), who emphasized how politicians aim to appeal to voters' emotions publicly to secure electoral success. This period marked a shift from viewing political communication as purely rational to recognizing emotions' powerful role in shaping voter behavior, attachments, and information diffusion. Thus, media content and communication style helped facilitate such "templates for emotions" over the years through publicly shared messages from politicians and political figures. As a whole, literature in political communication focuses on the strategic use of emotions to mobilize public support (De Castella et al., 2009; Gadarian & Brader, 2023; Reveilhac, 2023). Political messages using emotional appeals can motivate audience participation, activate existing loyalties, and facilitate persuasion (Brader, 2005, 2011). For example, when citizens feel enthusiastic, they are more likely to engage in political activities such as voting and reinforcing existing loyalties. Contrarily, politically mediated messages that induce fear increase vigilance and make citizens more likely to reevaluate their political choices (Weber, 2013).

Thus, while emotional appeals in political campaigns have been shown to elicit behavioral effects on citizens (van der Velden & Rebasso, 2021), studying the formation and impact of these templates of emotions can be a complex task as a whole, and in political communication in particular. Feelings are deeply subjective, and they can fluctuate instinctively. For this reason, studies have focused on the cognitive and public dimensions of political communication, namely, language and emotive elements conveyed through it (Szabó & Szabó, 2022). Our study aims to expand this notion by mapping out the statistical relationship of complex variables (such as the type of emotional cluster and political alignment) as expressed during crisis.

Moreover, as scholarly literature shows, public templates of emotions are no longer the sole property of political figures and institutions. Online platforms, as we further discuss in the following section on political communication online, offer ready-made emotional reactions to shared messages. These are platform features, i.e., possibilities that platforms present to their users for participation and engagement online, which should be understood through the prism of the "affordance theory" (Gibson, 1979; Noy, 2021) as discussed in the following section.

2.2. Emotions in Political Communication Online

Scholars have focused on online media to show how online platforms have become crucial arenas in political life over the last two and a half decades. These platforms both enable politicians to communicate directly with their followers and reach broader audiences (Vaccari et al., 2015) and enhance citizens' abilities to produce feedback through interactions with politicians and content sharing online (Yadlin-Segal, 2018). Thus, a new wave of studies has joined existing literature on political messages through speech, radio, television, and cinema (to name a few), focusing on emerging media technologies online, concerning both politicians and their active, engaged audiences (Gekker, 2019; Ilan, 2024; Yavetz, 2024). As mentioned above, this can be done through analysis of the varying interaction, engagement, and participation possibilities afforded by a given environment or object to an actor, clustered under "affordance theory."

Within media and communication studies, the theory serves as a conceptual framework for analyzing the evolving relationship between audiences and the media outlets/contents with which they engage. In digital media research specifically, scholars apply affordance theory to investigate how online platforms correlate with user participation. In the context of online platform research, the application of the affordance theory is built on several empirically established core assumptions: (a) emotional content, particularly hyperpartisan political posts, elicits heightened attention and reactions (Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021); (b) affordances simultaneously enable and constrain these reactions (Bakshy et al., 2015; Eslami et al., 2015); and (c) emotional reactions are varied through the effort a user is required to invest in an affordance, where low-effort affordances (thumbs up or down for example) might worsen polarization and widen ideological divides online (Wang & Sundar, 2022).

Affordance theory is especially apt for studying emotional reactions to political messaging on Facebook, as it draws attention to how platform-specific features affect, enhance, regulate, and sometimes limit users' emotional expressions online (Bossetta, 2018; Steinert & Dennis, 2022; Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021). Adopting an affordance perspective, we argue that social media platforms may independently magnify emotional reactions, beyond the intended influence of political actors, as the limited emotional spectrum offered on platforms might steer users to certain emotive responses, affecting risk management in crises.

This relationship between technological affordances and society is often also understood within the context of mediatization theory, which is used to unpack societal developments through a technological lens. Here, media technologies are approached as agents of social, political, and cultural impact alongside human actors (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Hepp et al., 2015). Mediatization, according to Hjarvard (2013), "generally refers to the process through which core elements of a social or cultural activity (e.g., politics, religion, and education) become influenced by and dependent on the media" (p. 30). Thus, looking at technological impact on society, non-media social actors (such as politicians and their audiences) adapt to new media technologies' rationale, rules, and affordances. Audience members, or online media users, become more and more active online through participatory features (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Yadlin-Segal, 2017), highlighting the central place that online mediated platforms play in political interactions. This approach, in essence, complements the affordances framework as presented above. Together, mediatization theory and affordances theory allow us a holistic approach to the relationship between online features and users' utilization in the political realm.

We utilize the mediatization theory alongside the affordances theory as an overarching framework to understand the political realm as influenced by both the human component (political actors and their online active audience) and technological affordances on social media. The study of these affordances is still underdeveloped in the intersection of the political realm and emotions (such as in the case of hope, sadness, fear, despair, anger, and frustration as politically constructed public emotions; Noy, 2016, 2021) and specifically, in the platform we seek to study: Facebook (Navon & Noy, 2021).

Facebook is particularly significant in the context of political communication, both globally and in Israel. It remains one of the most popular online communication platforms for the adult population (ages 18+) in Israel during 2024 (Bezeq, 2025). The platform is widely used for political discussions, politicians' communication with citizens, and public engagement (Steinfeld & Lev-On, 2024). In fact, in the Israeli case, following the October 7 Hamas attack and the Israel–Hamas war, Facebook's importance has only grown,

becoming one of the primary platforms for political discussion, maintaining its role in shaping public opinion during crises (Yavetz, 2024). This joins the overall trend of migration of Israeli users across online media platforms and their abandonment of X (formerly Twitter) by approximately 20% of users following its purchase by Elon Musk (Goicman, 2024).

With these contextual and theoretical frameworks in mind, much of the renewed interest in online-mediated emotional appeals appears to focus on populist parties, politicians, and language rather than on a broad spectrum of political traditions and alignments. In the context of emotions and online media affordances, this is not surprising. Maier and Nai (2020) suggest that politicians who use emotional messages, especially negative ones, receive much more attention than their peers, both in traditional and social media. When it comes to audiences' reactions to political messaging, populist political content benefits social media platforms. As negatively inclined content amplifies social media use and traffic, online media platforms tend to artificially emphasize it in the click-through and attention economy, seeking to amplify users' engagement with political content. Jost et al. (2020) found that exclusivist populist messages mediated online, such as anti-elitism and the scapegoating of minority groups, increase the number of angry responses made by followers towards these communities. Populist political content, which generates more buzz, thus became a potent instrument for politicians (Aslan, 2021; Park, 2015). In contrast, inclusive populism and positive portrayal of ordinary citizens lead to a higher number of love responses online and reduce the number of angry responses. This corresponds with citizens' ongoing cognitive and emotional needs to feel part of a greater national collective and activate members' appeal towards a cause greater than themselves (Wolak & Sokhey, 2022).

This analytical focus has become a pressing task as the past two decades have seen mediated political communication become a fertile ground for the rise of illiberal democracies, or at the very least, a hostile and polarized political atmosphere worldwide (Mordechay & Yadlin, 2024; Polyák, 2019). In short, while mediated populist emotional appeals gain popularity, their intersection with online platforms is framed as an agent of disruptive change. Social media serve as polarizing platforms by encouraging selective exposure of users to congenial views, creating fragmented online communities, and escalating hostile sentiments toward opposing groups (Yarchi et al., 2020; Zeeuw & Gekker, 2023). This is especially evident in politically divided environments like Israel, where sharp ideological rifts often make users more cautious about sharing political views on social media, fearing potential backlash from openly expressing partisan affiliations against the often aggressive and polarized online environment (Ziv & Yavetz, 2025).

Populist core ideas and communication style have diffused into the appeals and manifestos of traditionally non-populist mainstream parties, making it a propelling force within political arenas today, both globally and specifically in Israel (Tzelgov & Wilson, 2024). This requires attention in any exploration of politics and emotions. Considering these trends, the scarcity of studies on non-populist political communication becomes evident as a scholarly gap in knowledge. Thus, our aim in this research project is not only to contribute to the growing body of studies on populist emotional political appeals but also to holistically continue to include reactions to non-populist online political communication, holistically studying the political online mediascape. If we take seriously the role of academia in promoting fair and constructive knowledge to better society, understanding the reactions of users online, active audience members, to these trends is a crucial step in this direction. This is done here by paying attention to these trends in times of crisis.

2.3. Emotional Political Responses Online in Times of Crisis

As mentioned above, any study of emotions must provide a clear context and operationalization to produce effective results. The context in which we ask to study emotive political communication is that of a local crisis. Literature on emotions and politics suggests that during global and local crises, politicians, backed by mainstream news media, often prompt fear through provocative language beyond what is deemed appropriate (Ihekweazu, 2017; Windsor et al., 2015; Yadlin & Marciano, 2021).

State-level, or national crises—be it global health pandemics, natural disasters, war, terrorism, famine, poverty, or major economic disruptions—are understood as emergencies that require immediate and coordinated communication strategies from state-level officials (Boin et al., 2017; Christensen & Lægreid, 2020). Ideally, in these time periods, leaders' communicative choices in addressing the public bear particular importance, playing an essential role in fostering affective responses and compliance with emergency regulations (Evensen & Clarke, 2012; Pan & Meng, 2016; Rhodes-Purdy et al., 2021). However, in reality, discussions regarding crisis management are often used to capture political capital and worthiness in the eyes of potential audiences (Boin et al., 2017). Recent scholarship has shown how government communication on social media is susceptible to such politicization, with shifts in speech acts, sentiment, and engagement patterns reflecting the ideological alignment between agency leadership and institutional missions (DePaula & Hansson, 2025). Nowhere is the relationship between emotive language and political messaging more pronounced than in times of crisis, transforming and propelling the construction of national and transnational identities (Hutchison, 2016).

The Covid-19 crisis is a recent example of this claim. Morosanu (2020), for example, argues that some leaders, like German Chancellor Angela Merkel, effectively used emotional appeals to invoke calmness and rationality. Merkel's speeches were transparent and included specific actions, which helped reduce public fear and instill collective calm. On the other end of the spectrum, Morosanu (2020) argues that populist leaders often invoked fear as part of their messaging, intentionally or inadvertently, which led to collective panic. Speeches made during the pandemic by populist political figures like Donald Trump often resulted in heightened anxiety. These speeches created confusion, ultimately leading to collective panic instead of reassurance. When it comes to the productive management of crises, this difference is crucial and can have far-reaching influences in improving mortality rates and implementing life-saving measures.

Similarly, studies attest that during a military crisis, politicians use emotive messages to gain support and reach larger audiences (Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan, 2013). This was found to be true worldwide in studies about the UK, Turkey, the Netherlands, and Russia, for example (Bil-Jaruzelska & Monzer, 2022; Crilley & Chatterje-Doody, 2020; Duncombe, 2019; Halperin & Gross, 2011). In these cases, emotive messages escalated tensions between countries, particularly through pathos. This went as far as manipulating audience perception, fostering affective support, and deepening polarization between global actors involved in the war.

Periods of crisis are regularly marked by emotional polarization and heightened political divisions, often through expressions of negative sentiment online. Within this mediated emotional landscape on Facebook, particular attention has been given to the "angry" and "sad" reactions. Although these responses are commonly detected together and have been found to reflect comparable emotional negativity (e.g., Anwar &

Giglietto, 2024; Freeman et al., 2019; Larsson, 2024), their interchangeable use remains a point of conceptual and empirical critique. Some scholars caution against conflating these two emotional reaction markers, arguing that despite their shared valence, "angry" and "sad" may convey distinct emotional and communicative intentions. Paolillo (2023), for instance, notes their tendency to co-occur in empirical datasets, yet stresses the need for more nuanced investigations into possible different functions as well as the different intentionality behind them. This highlights an additional significant gap in existing knowledge concerning the differentiated roles of negative emotional reactions during times of crisis.

If we ask to summarize the main focal points of these cases, it appears that indeed, in the information society, scholars have been focusing on the new ways in which politicians and audiences seek affective connections, communication, and communities in times of crisis. Against the backdrop of this important work, the gap in knowledge is thus clear. The scarcity of studies that specifically focus on audience reactions afforded by technology platforms becomes evident. We thus see the need to explore the relationship between emotive political communication, social media affordances provided to citizens, and crises in multiple modalities (e.g., civic and military crises) on a local level. This combination is rarely considered in scholarly literature on emotive political communication and affective publics in online contexts. Discussions about the need for holistic diachronic accounts that inform, prepare, and assist scholars studying emotive political use of online media in crises are limited. Less is known about handling multiple, different crises within the same country diachronically. We aim to use the case study of the crises in Israel to fill this notable knowledge gap.

In the following section we provide an in-depth description of the methodologies that enabled us to produce this often-over-looked arena. Through this exploration we seek to answer the main RQ.

3. Problem Statement and Research Questions

Per the scholarly review and knowledge gaps mentioned above, the main goal of this study is to understand how political alignment (right, center, and left) and crisis periods interact with users' emotional responses. Following common practice in Israeli political science, we categorized parties into right, center, and left blocs based on the Israeli Democracy Institute's classification. While these categories are not always clear-cut in a multiparty system (Yavetz, 2025), they offer a widely accepted framework for political analysis (Zur & Bakker, 2023). Moreover, our research strives to understand the role of Facebook in creating non-human, non-politically oriented "templates for emotions," focusing on the platform's specific technological affordances of emotional reactions. To approach this, we have formulated the following research questions:

> RQ1: How do political alignment (right, center, and left) and crisis periods (routine, civil crisis, military crisis) correlate with total interactions and emotional responses on political Facebook posts?
>
> > RQ1a: What is the relationship between political alignment, total interactions, and emotional responses online?
> >
> > RQ1b: What are the differences between routine times and times of crisis (e.g., civil crisis and military crisis) in terms of total interactions and emotional responses online?

4. Methodology

To answer the RQs, we collected data using CrowdTangle, a software for online data mining from public social media accounts. CrowdTangle collects and extracts information on all of Facebook's interaction affordances, such as likes, shares, reactions, and comments (Atad et al., 2023; Yavetz, 2024). The use of this tool for collecting and organizing data in the context of governmental and parliamentary discourses, as is the case with our study, is well-established in the literature (Atad et al., 2023; El Baradei et al., 2021; Punziano et al., 2021; Yavetz, 2024) and will connect our methodological approach to existing literature in the field (Eberl et al., 2020; El Baradei et al., 2021; Pascual-Ferrá et al., 2021; Toff & Mathews, 2024).

Our sampling process sought to extract data from all active Israeli members of the Knesset (Parliament) and members of the government following the inauguration of the 25th Knesset on November 15, 2022. The data collection period encompassed a whole year and concluded on November 15, 2023. We decided to cover an entire year of data to produce a holistic, well-grounded corpus that reflects a panoramic view of the year's events, specifically choosing a year with abundant crisis contexts (as elaborated in-depth in Section 4.1).

Out of all the parliament and government members ($N = 133$), we found 87 active members with official, verified, public Facebook pages from which data could be extracted. In doing so, we met the required ethical guidelines for using social media data, in this case, Facebook (Yadlin-Segal et al., 2020). Meta's policies are critical in ensuring that the collected data is accurate, reliable, and compliant with privacy regulations, and only publicly available content from verified pages was included in our data corpus.

Indeed, relying exclusively on Facebook, while performed ethically and comprehensively, can introduce several limitations that may affect the generalizability and depth of research findings. In terms of user reactions, certain demographics may prefer other platforms over Facebook. Younger audiences, for instance, are increasingly gravitating towards platforms such as YouTube and TikTok (Gottfried, 2024). Solely analyzing Facebook data might, therefore, overlook younger segments of the population. Second, when considering this empirical choice, Facebook is, of course, built on an exposure algorithm. The way information spreads on Facebook differs from platforms like X or TikTok, potentially leading to platform-specific biases in research outcomes. In this context, K. C. Yang et al. (2020), for example, illustrate how the architecture of Facebook facilitates different reactions to posts and different patterns of misinformation spread compared to X. These differences exemplify a glimpse into how platform mechanisms impact user engagement and how information is shared and received, suggesting that research findings based solely on one platform may not be generalizable to others (Q. Yang et al., 2022).

These cannot be fully controlled. However, we have aimed to limit these biases as much as possible by theorizing platform affordances as part of the research design. By focusing on the participatory act that is pushed by the platform itself, our dataset is not simply a harvested corpus from a preexisting online mediated socio-political reality. Rather, by treating our data as a product of platformed mediation, or platform-shaped body of knowledge, a meeting place of users and platforms, we inherently acknowledge these biases (Bakshy et al., 2015; Bossetta, 2018; Eslami et al., 2015; Steinert & Dennis, 2022; Sturm Wilkerson et al., 2021). As such, "it is safe to say that the phenomenon was analyzed as it organically occurred online and as Internet users engaged with it" (Yadlin & Klein-Shagrir, 2021, p. 2541) where holistically, algorithmic visibility is compiled with user behavior online (Bucher & Helmond, 2018).

4.1. Data Corpus

Our finalized dataset includes members from the following Israeli political parties, ordered by the number of representatives in our sample: *n* = 29 Likud (National Liberal Movement), *n* = 16 Yesh Atid (There is a Future), *n* = 10 HaMachane HaMamlachti (National Unity), *n* = 9 HaTzionut HaDatit (Religious Zionism), *n* = 6 Yisrael Beiteinu (Israel Our Home), *n* = 5 Hadash-Ta'al (Democratic Front for Peace and Equality and Arab Movement for Renewal), *n* = 4 Otzma Yehudit (Jewish Power), *n* = 3 HaAvoda (Labor), *n* = 3 Ra'am (United Arab List), *n* = 2 Shas (Association of Torah-Observant Sephardim), and no active pages of members of Noam or Yahadut Hatorah (United Torah Judaism), mostly, due to religious ideology of social media avoidance.

The initial data extraction resulted in *N* = 25,137 posts. However, after sifting through the corpus, we removed posts that omitted critical analysis aspects, such as engagement rates or sentiment scores. Such omissions are acceptable in automated data collection and stem from various reasons, including incomplete metadata, technical errors, or privacy setting restrictions. Thus, the corpus was refined to include *N* = 24,491 posts published over the duration of the sampled year. To answer the RQs, this data corpus encompasses the following variables:

1. Political party: Ten political parties in the 25th Knesset whose members have active Facebook pages.
2. Political alignment: The traditional political alignment of right, left, and center (Israeli Democracy Institute, n.d.). This categorization is used instead of coalition vs. opposition, given that during the studied crises, politicians have moved between opposition and coalition several times. This categorization, while possibly somewhat reductive and not fully indicative of the nuances of Israel's political landscape, is still commonly accepted and utilized both for policy-making and empirical research scholarship (Katz, 2024).
3. Total number of posts: Number of posts per individual politician as included in the finalized data set.
4. Number of individual politicians: Eighty-seven politicians with verified public Facebook pages.
5. Average total interactions: The average number of interactions (likes, comments, shares, and reactions) per post, indicating the level of public engagement.
6. Average positive sentiment: Reactions indicating amiable sentiment in existing literature (like, love, hug, wow) per politician.
7. Average negative sentiment: Reactions indicating irate sentiment in existing literature (sad, angry) per politician.
8. Data period: Separate time slots within the year of data collection. NC (non-crisis routine): The first three months of government, from its inception on November 15, 2022, until January 4, 2023 (the starting point of the civil crisis). CC (civil crisis): The period following Yariv Levin, Israel's Minister of Justice, announcement of his plan for a judicial reform, resulting in unparalleled social unrest in Israel. This variable operationalizes the consecutive nine months between Levin's announcement, made on January 5, 2023, and October 6, 2023, the day before the Hamas terrorist attack on Israel, which initiated the military crisis. MC (military crisis): The first month of the Hamas–Israel war, from October 7, 2023, until November 15, 2023.

Table 1 details the distribution of active Facebook pages across the Israeli political landscape, along with political alignment, total number of posts, individual politicians, and average engagement metrics such as total interactions, positive sentiment, and negative sentiment for each party (Eberl et al., 2020; Jost et al., 2020; Widmann, 2021).

Table 1. Facebook post statistics per political party.

Party	Political alignment	Total number of posts	Number of unique politicians	Average total interactions	Average positive sentiment	Average negative sentiment
Hadash-Ta'al	Left	1,103	5	1,124.7	860.12	35.42
Israel Beiteinu	Right	2,120	6	776.38	543.53	38.11
Jewish Power	Right	1,300	4	4,755.28	3,715.26	169.54
Labor	Left	2,038	3	757.76	459.48	56.61
Likud	Right	7,880	29	2,039.91	1,528.17	71.84
Noam	Right	0	0	–	–	–
Ra'am	Left	362	3	311.04	266.38	4.42
Religious Zionism	Right	2,701	9	936.95	685.83	20.82
Shas	Right	68	2	905.81	642.21	60.93
National Unity	Center	2,360	10	1,215.4	870.44	61.53
United Torah Judaism	Right	0	0	–	–	–
Yesh Atid	Center	4,559	16	1,059.71	708.37	62.25
Subtotal		24,491	87	13,882.94	10,279.79	580.47

5. Data Analysis

To answer the research questions, we conducted statistical analyses of the dataset. Pearson correlation analyses were conducted to determine whether followers and likes at posting should be included as covariates in further analyses. Descriptive statistics for total interactions and emotional responses were calculated, and mean ranking was applied to adjust for deviations from normality.

To examine differences across political alignment and crisis periods, two-way ANCOVA tests (3 × 3) were conducted. The independent variables are political alignment (right, center, left) and crisis period (NC, CC, MC), with total interactions and emotional responses as dependent variables. Covariates include the number of followers and likes at posting, where we have sought to study the emotional responses of the Israeli public to politicians' messaging online. To this end, we have utilized Facebook reactions, a series of fixed emotive emojis that Facebook users can use to react to a post. Facebook reactions are non-textual, click-based user interactions with shared Facebook content, presented on Facebook at the bottom of a post (Freeman et al., 2019). As of the data collection period, these reactions are presented by Facebook as the following 7-option based emotive spectrum: like, love, haha, care, wow, angry, and sad. We examined whether significant differences would be found in the total interactions and different emotional responses online according to political alignment. We have focused on two variables: political alignment—right, center, and left; and period—NC, CC, and MC—with distribution ($p < .05$).

Table 2 presents the mean and standard deviation, as well as the median of these measures. Shapiro-Wilk's analyses indicated that the distribution of the study measures, the number of different emotional responses online, and the number of followers and likes at posting, deviate significantly from normal.

Table 2. Descriptive statistics of the different emotional responses online and number of followers and likes at posting (N = 24,491).

	Descriptive statistics		
Emotional responses online	Mean	*SD*	Median
Total interactions	1,567.92	3,581.13	385
Likes	1,017.68	2,299.43	241
Comments	265.45	795.82	52
Shares	87.86	268.12	19
Love	95.55	353.86	13
Wow	5.12	50.26	0
Haha	18.91	113.15	1
Sad	46.59	385.59	1
Angry	16.35	99.17	1
Care	14.41	102.77	2
Followers at posting	190,926.65	524,006.41	25,926
Likes at posting	182,132.04	508,262.80	23,109

Here, the number of followers and likes at posting should be taken as covariate variables, given the considerable variation in the number of followers and likes among the different Facebook pages. Pearson correlation analyses between the number of followers and likes at posting and the different emotional responses online indicate significantly positive correlations. This implies that as the number of followers and likes at posting increases, the total interactions and the number of different emotional responses online also increase respectively. Table 3 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients.

Table 3. Pearson correlation coefficients between the number of followers and likes at posting and the different emotional responses online (N = 24,491).

	Pearson correlation coefficients	
Emotional responses online	Followers at posting	Likes at posting
Total interactions	.51***	.50***
Likes	.51***	.50***
Comments	.36***	.36***
Shares	.31***	.30***
Love	.46***	.45***
Wow	.05***	.05***
Haha	.17***	.17***
Sad	.12***	.12***
Angry	.15***	.15***
Care	.22***	.22***

Note: *** $p < .001$.

Finally, before examining the research question, we have conducted an exploratory factor analysis to explore the various factors of the seven emotional responses online among the Israeli population and determine if these factors of different emotions resemble those found in previous research: positive, negative, and neutral. Similarly to previous research, an exploratory factor analysis using varimax rotation based on an eigenvalue greater than one indicated that the three orthogonal factors are consistent with the seven different emotional responses on Facebook (like, love, haha, care, wow, angry, and sad). However, as we will elaborate, some factors (or emotional reactions) that cluster together in this current analysis do not resemble clustering patterns found in previous research. Table 4 presents the exploratory factor analysis results.

Table 4. Exploratory factor analysis of the 7 emotional responses online ($N = 24{,}491$).

	Factor loadings		
Emotional responses online	Factor 1	Factor 2	Factor 3
Love	.94	–	–
Likes	.89	–	–
Haha	.46	–	–
Sad	–	.91	–
Care	–	.81	–
Angry	–	–	.84
Wow	–	–	.53
Eigenvalues	2.42	1.26	1.02
% of explained variance	29.10%	21.88%	16.13%

As can be seen in Table 4, the number of care reactions (positive) is associated with the same factor as the number of sad reactions (negative), and the number of wow reactions is associated with the same factor as the number of angry reactions (negative). Finally, the number of haha reactions is associated with the same factor as the number of love and like reactions (positive). Since the factors of the seven emotional reactions online in the current study differ from those found in previous research, differences in online emotional reactions in relation to political alignment and period were examined separately for each emotional reaction.

As mentioned, in the current study we aimed to examine whether significant differences would be found in the total interactions and different emotional responses online according to political alignment and period. Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics (mean and standard deviation, as well as the median) of these measures according to political alignment and period.

After presenting the descriptive statistics of the total interactions and the seven emotional responses online according to political alignment and period, we mean ranked the data. Ranking data is considered more robust, especially when dealing with non-normally distributed data, and is less affected by outliers or extreme values compared to raw numerical data (Corder, 2014). After we ranked the total interactions and different emotional responses, two-way (3×3) ANCOVAs were conducted for the mean ranks of these measures. Using mean rank ANCOVA can be a valuable approach when dealing with non-normally distributed data, as it provides a flexible method for analyzing group differences while controlling the sample for covariates. The independent variables here, as with the above statistical tests, were political alignment and period. The dependent variables were the number of total interactions and different emotional responses online.

Table 5. Descriptive statistics of the mean, SD, and median of the total interactions and the seven emotional responses online according to political alignment and period (N = 24,491).

		Political alignment								
		Right (n = 14,069)			Center (n = 6,919)			Left (n = 3,503)		
	Period	*M*	*SD*	Median	*M*	*SD*	Median	*M*	*SD*	Median
Total interactions	NC	2,206.24	4,026.41	686.00	1,659.81	2,999.45	283.00	1,039.90	2,283.08	279.00
	CC	1,870.00	4,088.59	439.00	1,277.29	2,915.89	253.50	808.65	1,754.79	339.50
	MC	1,713.96	4,250.39	317.00	1,118.53	3,198.41	222.00	719.14	2,031.83	304.50
Likes	NC	2,930.68	2,930.68	496.00	944.64	1,711.55	177.50	708.80	1,681.78	164.00
	CC	2,713.60	2,713.60	290.00	751.32	1,667.46	158.00	517.60	1,105.63	206.50
	MC	2,428.43	2,428.43	171.50	585.12	1,648.03	116.50	306.28	1,037.30	133.00
Comments	NC	253.06	502.03	72.00	394.08	859.33	44.00	158.32	329.79	46.00
	CC	285.81	861.41	62.00	269.30	738.81	31.00	149.78	369.61	48.00
	MC	355.69	1,174.88	52.00	182.54	716.81	15.00	107.39	639.32	25.50
Shares	NC	78.61	146.11	24.00	117.18	262.26	18.50	40.30	148.19	9.00
	CC	89.10	221.97	21.00	101.21	333.75	15.00	44.11	184.70	13.00
	MC	94.71	260.68	17.00	111.10	350.34	15.00	105.56	697.86	17.00
Love	NC	170.99	503.55	22.00	74.35	211.06	13.00	64.23	269.18	9.00
	CC	122.18	406.48	16.00	54.47	175.03	6.00	40.60	234.18	10.00
	MC	119.44	432.40	10.00	70.88	432.58	8.50	33.02	73.65	12.00
Wow	NC	2.33	6.51	1.00	21.92	94.14	0.00	0.90	1.93	0.00
	CC	2.03	5.88	0.00	11.37	87.36	0.00	1.26	6.54	0.00
	MC	1.39	4.56	0.00	18.39	122.91	0.00	0.78	2.54	0.00

Table 5. (Cont.) Descriptive statistics of the mean, SD, and median of the total interactions and the seven emotional responses online according to political alignment and period (N = 24,491).

		Political alignment								
		Right (n = 14,069)			Center (n = 6,919)			Left (n = 3,503)		
	Period	*M*	*SD*	Median	*M*	*SD*	Median	*M*	*SD*	Median
Haha	NC	16.16	83.34	1.00	40.12	156.23	1.00	26.27	100.32	2.00
	CC	16.18	107.32	1.00	18.19	63.59	1.00	19.19	86.52	2.00
	MC	36.75	242.68	2.00	4.61	59.29	0.00	9.08	44.83	2.00
Sad	NC	56.34	385.15	0.00	38.61	183.37	1.00	28.811	185.67	1.00
	CC	49.15	496.15	0.00	38.84	272.13	1.00	17.76	91.38	1.00
	MC	48.62	258.76	1.00	102.04	390.46	3.00	123.48	342.84	4.00
Angry	NC	12.73	63.82	1.00	17.66	81.16	1.00	6.51	16.32	1.00
	CC	15.37	91.98	1.00	21.10	136.47	1.00	21.10	72.79	1.00
	MC	23.21	111.13	1.00	9.06	53.71	0.00	7.44	61.43	1.00
Care	NC	13.64	38.86	3.00	11.26	55.60	2.00	5.76	19.85	1.00
	CC	15.06	107.25	2.00	11.50	111.37	1.00	4.99	19.17	2.00
	MC	23.35	138.29	2.00	34.79	166.02	4.00	26.12	82.19	7.00

The covariate variables were the number of followers and likes at posting. The total mean of the mean ranks, the mean estimated after controlling for the number of followers and likes at posting, and the *F*-values of the interaction effects are presented in Table 6. Only the interaction effects are presented, not the main effects, since the main effects do not provide additional meaningful information beyond what is already explained by the interaction effects. Gelman and Hill (2007) emphasize the need for interpretation of interaction effects to provide a more nuanced understanding of the relationship between variables, particularly when main effects may not fully capture the complexity of the relationship. Therefore, we focus on presenting the results of the significant interactions found in all measures and their interpretation, rather than the main effects, to avoid redundancy and ensure clarity in interpreting the results.

Table 6. Mean and mean estimated of the mean rank ANCOVAs for the total interactions and the seven emotional responses online according to period and political alignment while controlling for the number of followers and likes at posting (N = 24,491).

		Political alignment							Political alignment differences in each period		
		Right (1)		Center (2)		Left (3)					
	Period	*M*	Mean Estimated	*M*	Mean Estimated	*M*	Mean Estimated	Interaction	NC	CC	MC
Total interactions	NC	14,613.43	14,012.19	12,533.10	13,446.09	11,634.78	10,328.08				
	CC	13,041.40	12,736.07	10,837.60	11,954.48	11,739.56	10,768.00	14.26***	1 > 2 > 3	1 > 2 > 3	Non significant
	MC	11,766.09	11,643.52	10,103.25	11,151.40	11,277.12	11,260.23				
Likes	NC	14,964.50	14,368.90	12,252.31	13,174.70	11,599.86	10,244.32				
	CC	13,248.66	12,950.57	10,733.32	11,859.50	11,796.78	10,783.44	11.14***	1 > 2 > 3	1 > 2 > 3	1 = 2 > 3
	MC	11,278.58	11,150.94	9,879.17	10,536.93	9,879.17	9,836.31				
Comments	NC	13,651.38	13,072.66	13,097.31	13,949.40	11,983.27	10,816.33				
	CC	13,000.79	12,700.42	11,164.20	12,209.85	11,857.14	10,997.62	22.20***	2 > 1 > 3	1 > 2 > 3	1 > 2 = 3
	MC	12289.82	12181.09	8,845.86	9,824.16	9,797.88	9,820.47				
Shares	NC	13,310.77	12,700.18	13,048.71	13,745.90	9,759.70	9,005.58				
	CC	12,800.72	12,496.13	11,769.35	12,637.37	10,771.78	10,248.73	27.02***	2 > 1 > 3	1 = 2 > 3	Non significant
	MC	12,096.13	12,028.76	11,665.80	12,466.49	12,429.49	12,594.27				
Love	NC	14,669.25	14,142.45	12,561.87	13,336.73	10,925.40	9,865.84				
	CC	13,230.36	12,956.74	10,662.73	11,613.71	10,973.21	10,193.05	31.28***	1 > 2 > 3	1 > 2 > 3	Non significant
	MC	11,710.66	11,611.95	11,140.78	12,030.41	11,826.89	11,848.61				
Wow	NC	13,612.01	13,146.40	12,975.21	13,576.90	11,120.53	10,466.99				
	CC	12,650.23	12,388.18	12,139.41	12,888.34	11,481.53	11,027.68	6.13***	1 = 2 > 3	2 > 1 > 3	2 > 1 = 3
	MC	11,232.25	11,173.82	10,985.05	11,676.04	10,404.24	10,544.45				

Table 6. (Cont.) Mean and mean estimated of the mean rank ANCOVAs for the total interactions and the seven emotional responses online according to period and political alignment while controlling for the number of followers and likes at posting (N = 24,491).

		Political alignment									
		Right (1)		Center (2)		Left (3)			Political alignment differences in each period		
	Period	*M*	Mean Estimated	*M*	Mean Estimated	*M*	Mean Estimated	Interaction	NC	CC	MC
Haha	NC	12,271.32	11,779.29	12,760.28	13,317.84	1,351.13	13,089.72				
	CC	12,503.30	12,207.36	11,382.19	12,087.43	13,128.63	12,870.80	39.99***	2 = 3 > 1	3 > 1 = 2	3 > 1 = 2
	MC	12,815.76	12,781.12	9,140.51	9,781.04	12,518.32	12,780.35				
Sad	NC	11,924.62	11,599.41	13,472.31	13,849.36	12,326.92	12,051.41				
	CC	11,333.84	11,137.87	12,821.31	13,285.82	12,877.80	12,711.56	16.84***	2 > 1 = 3	2 > 3 > 1	3 = 2 > 1
	MC	12,403.64	12,381.25	15,082.15	15,503.82	16,226.37	16,401.70				
Angry	NC	12,065.89	11,620.65	12,548.51	13,059.81	12,483.48	12,076.43				
	CC	12,086.91	11,820.75	12,348.07	12,993.70	12,830.97	12,578.50	44.43***	2 = 3 > 1	2 = 3 > 1	1 > 2 = 3
	MC	13,175.57	13,141.88	10,177.43	10,764.80	11,593.70	11,820.97				
Care	NC	13,830.47	13,283.57	11,739.91	12,508.62	10,706.83	9,728.32				
	CC	12,427.09	12,134.35	10,984.82	11,932.76	11,587.49	10,878.76	73.92***	1 > 2 > 3	1 = 2 > 3	3 > 2 > 1
	MC	13,028.16	12,938.06	14,283.76	15,166.41	16,483.36	16,557.86				

6. Discussion and Conclusions

The first prominent finding shows that politicians with higher numbers of followers and likes tend to receive afforded reactions with "stronger" emotional stances such as anger, love, or sadness. This is an overall indication of the type of feelings that dominate users' emotive-political reactions to politicians. This relationship reveals that in terms of popularity, those politicians who receive more attention and exposure to a broader audience online set the overall tone online to be emotionally more charged, reflecting an online political landscape of negative valence. As mentioned earlier, such a negative tone both reflects, perpetuates, and even escalates a hostile political environment characterized by fragmented communities and adverse sentiments toward opposing groups (Yarchi et al., 2020). The designed set of emotional affordances analyzed by us requires low-effort participation on the user end and might worsen polarization and widen ideological divides online (Wang & Sundar, 2022). In these terms, our data corpus joins a discussion about crisis and socio-political instability where social media affordances contribute to the rise of a hostile and polarized, even illiberal, political atmosphere worldwide (Mordechay & Yadlin, 2024; Polyák, 2019; Yarchi et al., 2020).

Second, as we have shown above, times of crisis inevitably invite emotional polarity and political schisms that are characterized by negative sentiment. When focusing on these negative reactions, namely angry and sad, scholars highlight the need for further empirical exploration in times of crisis. It was shown that angry and sad tend to be co-presented in a similar manner (see, for example, Larsson, 2024) and specifically express similar negative emotional sentiment (Anwar & Giglietto, 2024; Freeman et al., 2019). Some scholars are cautious in interpreting similar findings, suggesting that even when negative in nature, these two reactions do not necessarily hold the same meaning. Nevertheless, they do indeed tend to cluster and appear together (Paolillo, 2023). Our findings reveal a different case. When comparing the reactions angry and sad in our data corpus, we see that during MC, these two emotional markers are not merely different; they stand in opposition to one another. In times of MC, the sad reaction was used least on right-aligning politicians' posts, while usage in reaction to center and left-leaning politicians was similar. In contrast, the angry reaction was used the most in reaction to right-aligning politicians' posts during MC, peaking in complete opposite to sad, again with comparable levels among the center and the left.

As such, in our data, the crisis that elicited the most extreme emotional reactions also produced the greatest disparity between these two types of reactions that commonly correlate in usage. This finding is highly significant and helps fill a notable gap in the literature: The angry and sad reactions on Facebook do not converge during the MC. Thus, our study offers empirical evidence that these two emotional markers behave in quantitatively opposite ways. Evidence of this conflicting behavior in previous studies is scarce.

A third and final finding shows a relationship between the period in which the post was published (NC, CC, MC) and the position of the emotional reactions received along the emotional spectrum. In our dataset, on the scale of emotions afforded by Facebook, users utilize the "edges" of the spectrum as time progresses, moving further into the more extreme reactions along the changes in crisis. During periods of crisis, especially military crises, there was a significant increase in responses such as anger and sadness, while during routine periods, there were more neutral or positive responses. Previous studies (Atad et al., 2023; Eberl et al., 2020) have shown that emotions like anger and sadness might be heightened during crises and contingencies. Our study supports these findings and offers new insights into how crises intensify emotional reactions and how these patterns shift compared to routine periods. While previous studies often treat crisis as a uniform trigger of

emotional responses, our findings differentiate between crisis types: military vs. civic and show that each elicits distinct emotional patterns. This finding required further theoretical anchoring.

As mentioned above, mediatization theory entails that societal developments should be read through a technological lens as a possible explanation of social, cultural, and political change. In this vein, media technologies are approached and studied as agents of social, political, and cultural impact alongside human actors (Deacon & Stanyer, 2014; Hepp et al., 2015). These platforms limit emotional expression to several fixed reactions, as highlighted by Eberl et al. (2020). This is highly relevant in political contexts, where complex emotional responses might be provoked outside this spectrum. Hence, we ask to combine the mediatization notion of media with Frevert and Pahl's (2022) concept of a "template for emotions," as reviewed above. As our findings reveal, online affordances such as Facebook's emotive reactions offer ready-made emotional reactions for online engagement.

We suggest these play a crucial role in steering the emotional political landscape. Considering the heightened negative emotive reaction, we suggest that social media might be driving the harsher reaction rather than, or perhaps alongside, politicians themselves. The limited emotional affordances, that is, the spectrum of emotions afforded on platforms like Facebook, could influence the formation of a shared, collective emotional expression, potentially amplifying certain emotions while underrepresenting others in times of crisis. This interplay positions social media platforms as a crucial player in the dissemination and formation of the emotional reactive landscape to trauma and crisis.

In this study, we have tested the dataset using two complementary statistical approaches. First, we applied Pearson correlation analyses to examine the relationships between follower count, likes, and emotional responses. This allowed us to control these variables in subsequent analyses. Next, we conducted a two-way ANCOVA to assess how political leanings and crisis periods jointly influenced emotional responses, thereby mapping the interaction between these factors in shaping online political discourse. These tests have yielded the above three main findings. These three findings suggest that the intersection of politics, crisis, emotions, and affordances is important to understand through a combination of criteria, among them the emotive reactions online social platforms provide and the ways users utilize them. A heightened emotional stimulus may prevent the ability to safely manage risks at times of crisis, further promoting disagreement between opposing political camps. Such findings should serve as an alarm for decision-makers regarding the management of the crisis and the safer management of emotional appeals and reactions in the public.

These findings align with previous studies by Brader (2005) and Gadarian and Brader (2023), which highlight the strategic use of emotions to engage political audiences. By accounting for these factors, we gained clearer insights into the interplay between political context and emotional expression on social media platforms (Papacharissi, 2014; Widmann, 2021). Given these initial important findings, we see a need to produce an analysis of the dataset based on alternative modelling strategies. Such future analysis, hopefully our own, would provide in-depth reflection on the frequent shift from government to opposition experienced by some parties in Israel, as well as on additional dimensions such as party size, sender seniority. This will be achieved through multilevel modelling and network analysis, and will provide data-driven hierarchical mapping of the political network and leading players within it. Yet, one article can do just so much, and given the limited scope and length, we present here initial findings that hopefully in the future will be further explored as described above.

However, this study is still not without its limitations. First, the tool used for data collection, CrowdTangle, is not entirely free from errors and constraints. Certain politicians' Facebook pages could not be included in our dataset due to their pages being unverified or failing to meet Meta's ethical data extraction policies. Furthermore, some politicians, particularly those with specific religious ideologies, may avoid publicly engaging in online political discourse, leading to their exclusion from this dataset and others.

In addition, it is important to stress that we do not evaluate ideological content or label parties as inherently "right" or "left" in essence, but rather only refer to political alignment classifications as used in previous studies and public discourse. In the same vein, Israel has experienced multiple significant crises within a relatively short period of only under one year. Together, these dynamics might make it challenging to generalize our findings to other countries, such as Western democracies, with different political spectra and crisis frequencies.

Still, some insights may resonate beyond this specific case. In particular, the role of emotional affordances on social media and their interaction with crisis typologies, such as military versus civic emergencies, may help explain online emotional dynamics in other polarized or high-stakes political environments. Given these limitations, we recommend future research to perhaps explore similar cases in different geopolitical contexts to assess the generalizability of our findings. Future research should also consider experimental research designs that will help operationalize causal policy-forward insights for politicians and other policymakers in terms of the use and affect of specific discourses and affordances on social media. As Theisen et al. (2025) show, such indicators could be an important form of early warning signal to political crises and should be further studied. Finally, combining different methods, such as interviews or content analysis, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of emotional responses in political communication online.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Dr. Shlomit Shnitzer-Meirovich for her invaluable statistical consultation and her insightful feedback throughout the analysis process.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used for light vocabulary and sentence structure editing of the final version of this article.

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10425
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10425

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Open Access Journal

Whom to Trust in Crises? The Influence of Communicator Characteristics in Governmental Crisis Communication

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Submitted: 29 March 2025 **Accepted:** 8 September 2025 **Published:** 8 October 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

Public sentiment toward government communicators plays a critical role during crises, influencing societal resilience and potentially contributing to broader trust in government. Such sentiment is shaped not only by what is said, but also by who says it. While existing literature on political crisis communication has largely focused on the content of governmental messages, it has overlooked the importance of the messenger. This study addresses that gap by shifting attention from what is communicated to who is communicating. This research explores how the personal characteristics of government communicators relate to public sentiment toward them during crises. To do so, this study matches data on communicators present at government-held press conferences with social media discourse, examining how these communicators are referenced online. Social media platforms serve as vital spaces where citizens communicate about their government's crisis response and thus play an important role in building or undermining public responses. Given their role in shaping public perceptions of government performance, these digital platforms offer an ideal setting to observe sentiment toward communicators during crises. The study analyzes 744,000 posts on Twitter (now X) from six European countries during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic using advanced transformer-based classification models. Expressions of positive sentiment are identified through sentiment analysis, capturing affective reactions in user-generated content. The findings indicate that political actors are generally associated with less positive sentiment than experts, who tend to elicit more positive responses. Gender also emerges as a significant factor: During peak crisis periods, women communicators are more likely to be referenced positively on social media. This pattern aligns with prior research on a potential "trust advantage" for women in crisis communication, which has been linked to relational communication traits that are particularly valued in high-stress contexts.

Keywords

crisis communication; government communication; public perception; social media; sentiment

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1. Introduction

Global trust in authorities has eroded, driven by widespread skepticism toward social institutions and the rise of an "infodemic"—the pervasive spread of misinformation and disinformation that weakens the credibility of official crisis communications (Ahern & Loh, 2021; Yousefinaghani et al., 2022). Effective leadership and communication are more important than ever as politicians face increasing challenges in conveying guidance during crises like climate change, migration, or pandemics. To foster collective action, communicators must secure positive public sentiment and promote a shared understanding of the situation. Positive sentiment may ultimately contribute to trust, not just as a belief in the reliability or integrity of leaders but as a relational dynamic between leaders and the public. Political leaders are only capable of acting if they hold the approval of the electorate, which is granted or denied not only through elections but also through affective responses such as public sentiment (Wagner-Olfermann, 2022). Against this backdrop, government communication has become both more visible and more vulnerable. In parallel with the digitalization of public life, governments now increasingly use social media as an essential tool for policy announcements, crisis responses, and public engagement. This shift raises critical questions about how governments can build and maintain trust in digital environments that are dynamic, participatory, and often polarized (Novotná et al., 2023).

Governments recognize the crucial role of communication in building and maintaining trust, particularly during crises. Accordingly, they strategically use press conferences and speeches, incorporating a range of actors—scientists, economists, and other experts—who bring diverse perspectives and expertise (Boin et al., 2005). Amid these dynamics, as audiences turn to political press conferences during crises, they increasingly seek additional information on social media, where public discourse shapes perceptions of both the message and the credibility of the messengers. These platforms provide a valuable opportunity to observe affective responses in real time, as individuals collectively interpret and respond to crisis communication and assess the performance of leaders and experts online (Huber et al., 2019). Expressions of sentiment offer insights into how people emotionally evaluate a communicator's credibility, intentions, and competence, which may influence broader perceptions of trust.

Public sentiment toward government communicators plays a key role in how crisis communication is received, yet little research has systematically examined how such sentiment is shaped. While extensive research explores communication strategies employed by governments through message content and delivery, little attention has been given to who delivers the message (Post et al., 2019; Renn & Levine, 1991; Yousefinaghani et al., 2022). However, considering the broader constellation of government communication, previous research suggests the need to expand the focus of crisis leadership from messages to messengers by observing public reactions to those delivering messages. Although the importance of the messenger is acknowledged, there remains a lack of systematic, large-scale empirical analysis focusing specifically on how characteristics such as institutional role and gender relate to public sentiment toward communicators. To address this gap, this study shifts the focus from message content to communicator characteristics. It explores how affective responses to government communicators are expressed during crises, focusing on political press conferences and simultaneous online discussions.

The article argues that individual characteristics, particularly communicators' roles and gender, play a significant role in shaping sentiment towards them. Previous research suggests that experts are generally more likely to elicit positive public reactions than politicians, as they are often viewed as providers of

objective and evidence-based information. In contrast, politicians may be seen as pursuing strategic or political goals, which can undermine how favorably their communication is received by the public (Yousefinaghani et al., 2022). Additionally, studies indicate that women communicators tend to be associated with more relational and empathetic communication styles, which are frequently linked to higher levels of perceived trustworthiness (Post et al., 2019). Accordingly, the study proposes three hypotheses: First, experts are generally expected to be more likely to receive positive sentiment than other communicators; second, politicians and elected officials are expected to be less likely to receive positive sentiment than other communicator types; and third, women communicators are expected to be more likely to be referenced positively than men communicators.

This research examines the composition of press conference panels and the subsequent reactions on social media to assess how online expressions of sentiment vary across different crisis communicators. It specifically investigates which communicator characteristics are associated with positive mentions in online discourse. By analyzing how users emotionally respond to different types of communicators, it offers insights into patterns of sentiment expression in digital discourse that can help inform our understanding of the dynamics underlying trust. Leveraging data from government communications in six European countries (Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom) from Hayek et al. (2024) and an original dataset of concurrent online discourse from 744,441 public tweets (now X posts) during the Covid-19 pandemic, this study provides new insights into sentiment in crisis communication and leadership in real-world settings, insights that may help explain how public trust in government takes shape during crises. Using a combination of a dictionary approach and document classification, the research identifies when posts reference government communicators and whether they reference them expressing positive sentiment. This methodological framework enables a systematic assessment of the relationship of communicator roles and gender to affective responses expressed in online discourse.

The results demonstrate that the individual characteristics of communicators are significantly associated with the likelihood of positive references in social media discourse. Communicators in political roles are significantly less likely to elicit positive responses, while experts are more likely to do so. Gender also plays a role, with women communicators being significantly more likely to receive favorable responses, a trend that intensifies as the severity of the crisis increases. This research contributes to the study of sentiment formation toward governments in online discourse by systematically analyzing communicator characteristics and suggesting a shift in focus from messages to messengers, offering insights that may be relevant to understanding how public trust is formed during crises. Additionally, it introduces a methodological framework that matches real-time social media posts with large-scale real-life events, enabling the analysis of public reactions as they unfold.

2. Conceptual Framework and Literature Review

Public sentiment toward leaders is an important prerequisite for effectively addressing challenges and crises. Research finds that the resolving of crises hinges on coordinated collective efforts, often involving restrictive measures. Crisis leaders communicate such efforts and rely on public attention to their messages (Boin et al., 2005). Particularly in times of crisis, sentiment towards political actors shapes citizens' willingness to follow official recommendations and support government policies (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). To that end, governments assemble key personnel from both within and outside the government to lead communication efforts. The composition of communicators in government crisis communication has been found to directly

influence the effectiveness and reception of the message. Research has thoroughly examined how emotional appeals and message framing shape public responses during crises (Lecheler et al., 2013; Tolochko et al., 2019; van Der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014), yet perception is not shaped solely by what is said—it is also shaped by who is saying it. Audience perceptions of a communicator's credibility, expertise, and authority have been found to affect how messages are received and whether they are accepted or rejected (Warren & Lofstedt, 2022; Wynne, 1991).

Research on the Covid-19 pandemic shows that compliance with policies and measures is shaped by perceptions of crisis communicators (Devine et al., 2021), and public support for countermeasures is often linked to trust in the leaders themselves (Ahern & Loh, 2021). The literature on leadership and crisis communication has found that communicators' gender and role influence how they are perceived (Freund & Shomer, 2024; Lehrer et al., 2024; Schnabel et al., 2024; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). Importantly, these characteristics don't necessarily need to be reflected in the communicator's message. Rather, sentiment towards communicators often stems more from who they are than from what they say.

Recent research supports this, showing that individual characteristics do not significantly affect how communicators deliver their messages, thus making characteristics more relevant to audience perception (Dingler et al., 2024). During crises, the leadership typically consists of government officials and politicians responsible for managing the situation. Governments also frequently involve experts, such as researchers or practitioners, who provide specialized knowledge about the crisis. In addition, representatives from related organizations, the economy, or civil service are sometimes included. However, politicians and experts remain the most prominent communicators. In terms of the gender of communicators, research finds that women are underrepresented (Wegner, 2025). Understanding how communicators' characteristics shape sentiment is crucial for effective crisis leadership.

Sentiment plays a central role in crisis communication because affective reactions to communicators can influence how the public engages with government efforts. While sentiment is not equivalent to trust, it may contribute to the erosion of trust over time, especially in high-stakes contexts that demand public cooperation. Supportive and approving sentiment may suggest affective alignment with trust, while critical and hostile expressions may reflect orientations consistent with distrust (Mohammad & Turney, 2013). Understanding how these affective responses emerge is especially relevant in crisis situations, where emotional reactions can shape broader political perceptions.

Trust is a broader and more complex construct than sentiment. It involves expectations that political actors or institutions will behave in line with established norms and expectations (Goovaerts & Marien, 2020). Conceptually, trust is inherently relational; it requires a willingness to accept vulnerability towards another individual, group, or institution that has the capacity to either fulfill or betray that trust (Levi & Stoker, 2000). Political trust refers to a citizen's belief in the integrity, competence, and benevolence of political actors or institutions, whereas distrust reflects skepticism and the perception that these actors are self-serving or unreliable (Citrin & Stoker, 2018). Trust is rarely unconditional (Levi & Stoker, 2000); it is granted selectively and often within specific domains. For instance, citizens may trust their government to protect them during crises but remain skeptical of bureaucratic institutions in routine policymaking. Trust encompasses cognitive, behavioral, and affective components: While trust fosters cooperation and acceptance of political decisions, distrust can lead to vigilance, resistance, or disengagement from political processes (Levi & Stoker, 2000).

While this study does not directly measure trust, it focuses on the affective expressions of social media users responding to crisis communicators, as prior work shows that these expressions, captured through sentiment analysis, can shape perceptions of trustworthiness (Bertsou, 2019; Jennings et al., 2021).

Affective responses, such as expressions of sentiment, are particularly relevant in the context of social media discourse. Platforms like Twitter are designed to facilitate rapid, spontaneous expressions in social environments, making them well-suited to capturing emotional reactions (Calefato et al., 2015). In contrast, cognitive trust, based on evaluations of competence, reliability, or responsibility, involves more deliberative reasoning, which is less likely to be conveyed in short-form social media posts (Calefato et al., 2015; Granatyr et al., 2017).

These dynamics position sentiment as a meaningful lens through which to observe how government communicators are emotionally evaluated in online discourse. Expressions of positive sentiment can reflect support, appreciation, or confidence. Research has drawn connections between such affective expressions and broader evaluative attitudes. For example, Yousefinaghani et al. (2022) treat language of appreciation, empathy, or respect in tweets as indicative of favorable orientations toward public figures. Alsaid et al. (2023) further suggest that linguistic cues in text may more directly reflect emotional responses than behavioral signs, which can be strategic or ambiguous.

When crises strike, political leaders are at the forefront, making key decisions, communicating, and holding ultimate authority over government action. They are held accountable for the quality of these decisions (Schnabel et al., 2024). However, previous literature presents mixed findings on how that affects public evaluations. On the one hand, their exposed role is found to enhance public support (Wagner-Olfermann, 2022). A well-documented empirical pattern in the perception of political leadership is the "rally effect," whereby the public tends to unite behind the incumbent leadership during times of crisis as the sense of threat often boosts approval of the leader (Lehrer et al., 2024; Schnabel et al., 2024).

Yet, despite evidence that public sentiment toward politicians can improve during certain phases of a crisis, studies suggest this effect to be temporary (Eisele, Litvyak, et al., 2022) and reveal contrasting longer-term patterns. Politicians may face underlying public skepticism, as they are often seen as being driven by political motives rather than genuine concern for public safety, particularly in contrast to communicators in other roles (Yousefinaghani et al., 2022). Therefore, hypothesis 1 states:

> H1: During times of crisis, public social media posts are less likely to express positive sentiment toward politicians compared to other communicators.

Research presents varied findings on public sentiment towards experts during crises, particularly in the context of social media use for information-seeking and discussion. On the one hand, social media news use has been positively associated with confidence in science, primarily by expanding and diversifying users' information networks (Huber et al., 2019). On the other hand, public debates around scientific issues such as climate change and the Covid-19 pandemic have also fueled skepticism towards scientists (Eberl et al., 2023). In this context, science-related populist attitudes, marked by distrust of a perceived immoral academic elite, have gained traction and are strongly associated with the broader rejection of science (Eberl et al., 2023; Mede et al., 2021). Individuals who hold these views are especially active on social media platforms (Mede et al., 2023).

Despite these trends, experts are generally evaluated more positively than political figures during crises, as their communication is seen as more accurate and effective in managing risks (Yousefinaghani et al., 2022). Unlike politicians, experts, such as scientists or bureaucrats, are expected to provide rational explanations and legitimize the inherent uncertainty of scientific assessments during crises. Their motivation is often perceived as rooted in objectivity and public service rather than strategic political gain (Dingler et al., 2024; Warren & Lofstedt, 2022). As a result, they are seen as objective and competent, two core dimensions of trust (Renn & Levine, 1991). Therefore, hypothesis 2 states:

> H2: During times of crisis, public social media posts are more likely to express positive sentiment toward experts compared to politicians and other communicators.

A substantial body of literature also addresses gendered expectations in crisis communication and leadership. It finds that, based on societal expectations and gendered stereotypes, women are expected to exhibit communal and kind attributes, which are not regarded as stereotypically male. Because leadership is often associated with stereotypically male attributes, this misalignment can disadvantage women in leadership positions (Freund & Shomer, 2024; Koenig et al., 2011; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018). While these gendered stereotypes and associated expectations disadvantage women in leadership roles in non-crisis times, they might give women a trust advantage in times of crisis (Post et al., 2019). Women communicators are often associated with a relational style of communication, emphasizing compassion and empathy in delivering crisis-related information and instructions (Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020; Yousefinaghani et al., 2022). Such relational communication traits foster more positive evaluations and are associated with greater trust, which in turn can enhance compliance with rules and guidelines (Post et al., 2019). Research also shows that women enhance perceived effectiveness by optimizing team performance (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Freund & Shomer, 2024) and use fewer appeals to threat in their messaging (Dingler et al., 2024). These characteristics may contribute to more positive affective reactions for women in crisis communication, including on social media. Indeed, studies show that posts by women on social media platforms create higher levels of engagement (McGregor & Mourão, 2016; Yarchi & Samuel-Azran, 2018), although others highlight gendered backlash when social media users reply to crisis communicators, with offensive language being used more frequently in replies to women (Yousefinaghani et al., 2022). Hypothesis 3a states as follows:

> H3a: During times of crisis, public social media posts are more likely to express positive sentiment toward women communicators compared to men communicators.

Recent research links observed gendered leadership advantages during crises to the experience of crisis-related damages and the resulting demand for specific leadership traits. Building on this, research on crisis leadership argues that the gendered leadership effect is context-dependent and particularly salient during crises (Freund & Shomer, 2024; Yousefinaghani et al., 2022). Relational behavior, such as showing compassion and managing the emotions of others, is a critical mechanism for building and restoring positive sentiment in crises. This behavior constitutes a form of interpersonal emotion management that underlies the observed trust advantage associated with female leadership. Crises are emotionally intense events characterized by uncertainty and relational disruption, making the ability to anticipate and respond to others' emotional needs more salient, specifically when anticipating people's threat perceptions. As crisis severity and damages increase, so do perceived threats, which in turn amplify the relevance of relational leadership traits (Post et al., 2019).

Therefore, research suggests that this gendered leadership advantage may become more pronounced as crisis severity increases and damages become more pronounced. Findings suggest that while people generally expect assertiveness and decisiveness from their leaders, in times of crisis they also seek compassion, care, and support, qualities often associated with women due to gender stereotypes. While Windsor et al. (2020) find no significant differences in Covid-19 outcomes between male- and female-led countries, Freund and Shomer (2024) identified a performance gap favoring women under high-stakes conditions, attributing this to more favorable public perceptions female leaders receive in such contexts, leading to people being more willing to adhere to countermeasures. As damage accumulates and public needs for reassurance grow, the relational and compassionate traits stereotypically associated with women may become increasingly valuable. Accordingly, hypothesis 3b states:

> H3b: As damages occurring from a crisis increase, public social media posts are more likely to express positive sentiment toward women communicators.

3. Study Design

3.1. Document Selection

The Covid-19 pandemic has demonstrated its significance as an important context for investigating the relationship between government communication and online discourse during crises. With people resorting to digital communication channels, online platforms have become central for disseminating and receiving crisis-related information (London & Matthews, 2022; Perez-Cepeda & Arias-Bolzmann, 2022; Wang et al., 2021). The dynamic nature of the pandemic allows for a real-time analysis of government messaging and the corresponding online commentary it generates. Additionally, the scale of the pandemic provides an opportunity to comparatively examine variations in government communicators and their reception within diverse online communities (Eisele, Tolochko, & Boomgaarden, 2022).

Therefore, to test the hypotheses, this article investigates the constellation of communicators in government crisis communication and corresponding online discourse in six European countries: Austria, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, and the United Kingdom. The selection of countries is guided by both theoretical and empirical considerations. Limiting the sample to European countries ensures comparability in terms of institutional and socioeconomic structures, factors that shape both governmental crisis responses and patterns of public engagement. Moreover, focusing on a geographically contained region enhances the comparability of the crisis itself. While the Covid-19 pandemic was a global phenomenon, its timing and spread varied across regions. At the same time, the selected countries offer variation in dimensions central to this study, including the severity of the pandemic's impact and pre-existing levels of public trust in government and science. This combination of structural comparability and contextual diversity enables a robust examination of how characteristics of government communicators shape public perceptions during crises.

Two types of data were collected for this study: To analyze the communication setups of governments, this study looks into the communicators at press conferences delivered by governments during the initial phase of the Covid-19 pandemic, these being governments' preferred means of communication during times of crisis (Ekström & Eriksson, 2018). Leaders typically communicate their decisions through public statements like press releases and press conferences. In doing so, they demonstrate their grasp of the crisis and its societal impacts,

helping to shape the public's understanding of the situation and garner support for their policies (Boin et al., 2005). For each country, the sampling period extends from the first public address concerning Covid-19 to the announcement of the relaxation of restrictive measures implemented to curb the virus for the first time (see Table A9 in the Supplementary File).

Data on communicator information are derived from Hayek et al. (2024) and, after adaptation to the countries under study in this article, the data consist of a total of 285 press conferences and televised addresses that were conducted during the initial phase of the pandemic, spanning from January to July 2020. Each press conference is segmented according to the presence of different communicators. Each segment is attributed to its respective communicator, resulting in a total of 150 different actors delivering speeches who serve as identifiers for linking press conferences to social media references. Additionally, information was included in the final dataset for each day a press conference was held, such as the number of Covid-19-related deaths, the day of the week, and the number of days that had passed since the first press conference, as well as biographical data on the communicators, such as role and gender.

Politicians made up the largest group of communicators in all countries, typically ministers and heads of government, reflecting the political significance of the crisis. While most countries also included non-political figures, the composition of speaker groups varied. Austria featured the most diverse set of speakers, including not only politicians but also representatives from the economic sector, religious figures, and public administrators, with 53 individual communicators in total. In contrast, countries like Germany, France, and Italy relied on a smaller number of speakers, drawn mainly from politics and the civil service. The United Kingdom stood out for involving a nearly equal number of politicians and experts, many with public health or scientific backgrounds. Gender representation was generally imbalanced: Out of all 150 communicators, only 47 were women. Spain came closest to gender parity (17 out of 39), while Austria and Germany had notably low women's representation.

Secondly, to test how communicators are referenced in online discourse, an initial dataset of 744,441 public posts to the platform Twitter was collected. The data were extracted based on the mention of specific keywords for a specified time period that corresponds to the time frame of press conferences for each country, using the Twitter API via the OAuth 2.0 Bearer Token access in R. The data usage terms and conditions outlined by Twitter were carefully followed, and since the tweets collected for the study were from the public domain, no additional ethical approval was necessary.

The initial data consist of tweets posted by a total of 175,794 public accounts in all six countries under study across the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic, that is, from January to July 2020. The criterion for including posts was the presence of at least one specified keyword. The keywords were selected individually for each country by gathering the most searched terms through Google's search engine at any given point in time and manually selecting those connected to the Covid-19 pandemic, which allows for a context-specific query of tweets for each country, taking into account country-specific terminology (the full list of search terms is provided in A12 in the Supplementary File). Health-related Google search data have proven to be a reliable predictor of people's experiences (Senecal et al., 2021; Yuan et al., 2021), making the data well-suited for generating meaningful keywords to identify related online discourse. Each extracted tweet was associated with a specific press conference based on the posting date and the country of origin. Tweets were composed mainly in English (47.7%), followed by Spanish (18.6%), French (15.7%), Italian (13.6%), and German (4.4%).

For the pre-processing of Twitter data, this article employs common methods used for handling social media data (Jain et al., 2021). The original tweets comprise various elements, including words, punctuation, URLs, and usernames. Before analyzing the tweets, the text data were cleansed by eliminating all components irrelevant to this study. The initial data cleansing involves removing URLs, hashtags, emoticons, punctuation marks, symbols, and numbers, as well as converting all text to lowercase.

3.2. Dependent Variable: Sentiment in Public Tweets

To construct the final dataset, tweets were filtered to identify those mentioning communicators present at the press conferences with a combination of automated and manual search, leaving a final dataset of 12,718 tweets. To this end, a dictionary was developed containing all names of communicators appearing at any of the press conferences held by governments. The detection of names based on the dictionary was conducted in multiple steps in order to increase accuracy. First, all last names were compiled and used as search terms. When certain last names were ambiguous—such as those also functioning as common words—these cases were manually reviewed. For these instances, supplementary lists of search terms were created, incorporating first names and the communicators' roles. To ensure that tweets mentioning communicators with ambiguous last names were correctly attributed, they had to include at least one of these additional search terms. Overall, 93 communicators were identified as being referenced in public tweets.

To examine how affective responses toward these communicators are expressed in tweets, this study employs an advanced text-as-data approach to analyze a large corpus of user-generated content. The analysis focuses on sentiment both as an observable indicator of how government communicators are evaluated in online discourse and as an attitudinal disposition with a strong emotional component that may speak to broader concepts such as trust (Bertsou, 2019; Jennings et al., 2021). While sentiment is not equivalent to trust, it may reflect the emotional orientations that often accompany trust in political and crisis contexts.

This study uses sentiment analysis to identify expressions of appreciation, support, or confidence that often align with positive orientations toward a communicator, while expressions of criticism or hostility reflect negative evaluations. For sentiment classification—categorizing tweets as positive, negative, or neutral—this research utilizes XLM-RoBERTa, a transformer-based model designed for multilingual text analysis (Conneau et al., 2019). XLM-RoBERTa is pre-trained on extensive unlabeled multilingual text, providing a robust syntactic and semantic understanding of language. Given its superior ability to grasp lexical context, XLM-RoBERTa consistently outperforms other machine-learning models in text classification tasks. This study relies on the XLM-RoBERTa model fine-tuned by Barbieri et al. (2022) and Camacho-Collados et al. (2022). Their version of the model was trained on a dataset of more than 24,000 tweets and is applied here to the unlabeled tweet data. This finetuned model classifies each tweet into one of the predefined sentiment categories: positive, negative, or neutral.

The sentiment probabilities generated by the model for each tweet are recorded. To quantify the overall sentiment, these probabilities are weighted by assigning −1 to negative, 0 to neutral, and +1 to positive classifications. This produces a continuous sentiment score ranging from −1 to +1, which reflects the tweet's overall position on the sentiment scale by integrating all three class probabilities. To construct the binary outcome used for the analysis, each tweet is classified as positive if the resulting score is greater than 0, and as non-positive otherwise (i.e., if the score is 0 or negative). The binary outcome thus captures

the likelihood that a tweet expresses a positive affective response toward a government communicator. To illustrate how sentiment was expressed in the analyzed tweets, Table A1 in the Supplementary File presents representative examples. To assess the validity of this operationalization, a validation procedure was conducted comparing model classifications to a manually annotated sample of tweets. The classifier performs well, particularly in distinguishing between positively and negatively valenced content (see Tables A2 and A3 in the Supplementary File).

The following tweet illustrates how a positive affective response is expressed toward speaker Rishi Sunak: "Rishi Sunak is seriously impressive in incredibly uncharted waters hes been unwavering composed and reassuring the next pm." This tweet conveys emotional approval and confidence in Sunak's leadership during a crisis. Terms such as "seriously impressive," "unwavering," "composed," and "reassuring" highlight perceived competence and calmness, signaling confidence in his ability to lead effectively. The sentiment is clearly directed at Rishi Sunak as an individual communicator. In contrast, tweets that are purely informative were coded as neutral and therefore not as containing affective responses. The following tweet illustrates this: "Miguel Ángel Villarroya, Chief of the Defense Staff, begins his speech by saying that today is Monday because in war, there are no Saturdays or weekends, every day is Monday." This message reports information without emotional evaluation or approval and was not classified as containing positive sentiment. For additional examples and detailed descriptions, see Table A13 in the Supplementary File.

3.3. Independent Variables: Communicator Characteristics

The key independent variables are the role and gender of communicators involved in government press conferences. Each communicator was coded for gender (women or man) and role, as politician (for example, ministers), as expert (for example, virologists, nurses), or as other (for example, representatives of the companies related to the crisis, such as those providing communication infrastructure). While the "politician" and "expert" categories reflect consistently visible groups in crisis communication, the "other" category captures a more diverse set of communicators whose involvement varies by country and crisis. This group includes individuals who do not occupy formal political office or domain-specific expert roles but still contribute to the government communication events. This group of "other communicators" acts as the reference group in the models, allowing for the estimation of differences in responses to the communicator roles of "politician" and "expert." Thus, in the dataset, every tweet is associated with a communicator identified by gender (woman or man) and by role (politician, expert, other). Control variables include the number of weekly Covid-19 deaths per 100,000 in every country (World Health Organization, 2023), capturing the number of Covid-related deaths that occurred matched to the calendar week in which each tweet was posted. Additionally, controls include the share of citizens who expressed trust in scientists in 2020 (Wellcome, 2020), the share who trusted the government in 2019 in each country (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025, indicator: "Trust in government"), the number of days since the first press conference was held in each country, and the share of women in national parliaments in 2020 (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2025, indicator: "Women in politics"). Some of these contextual indicators refer to periods prior to or slightly beyond the crisis onset and are used to approximate baseline attitudes and structural conditions.

4. Results

Before examining the relationship of gender and communicator roles to affective responses in social media posts, it is essential to analyze how these characteristics appear in both press conferences and social media posts. Descriptive statistics reveal that across all countries studied, politicians and experts are the most frequently referenced roles, indicating a strong public focus on these communicators. Politicians are overrepresented in social media posts when compared to their actual appearance in press conferences (see Figure 1 for a detailed overview of communicator constellations in press conferences and their references on Twitter). Notably, in Germany and Italy, only politicians and experts were referenced in tweets, despite their representation in press conferences being 60% and 18%, respectively. In most countries, both roles were referenced more frequently in tweets than their actual appearance in press conferences, although in France, tweets did not reference experts at all. The governments in both France and Italy had the lowest proportions of experts present at press conferences, at nearly 9%.

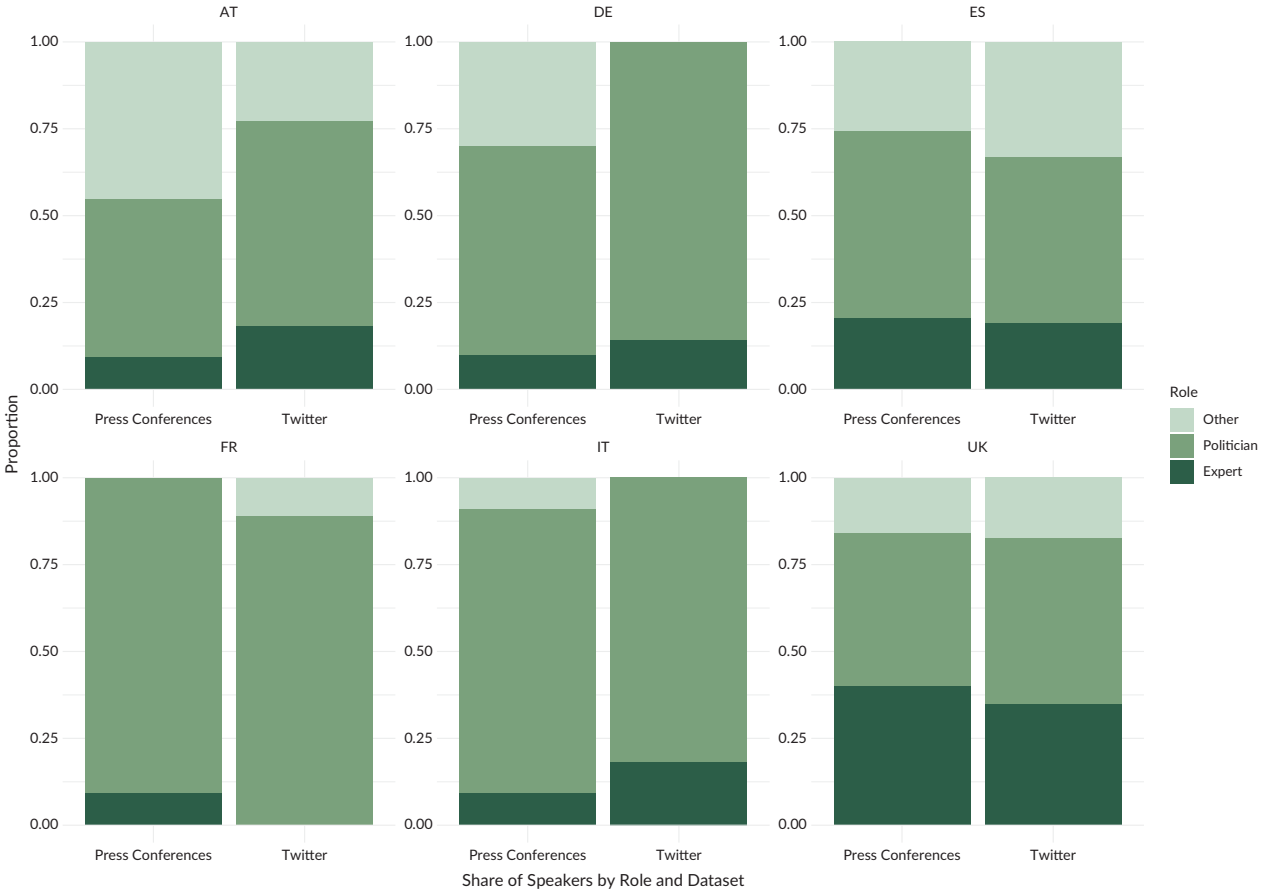


Figure 1. Comparison of communicator role composition in press conferences and Twitter mentions by country.

When examining the gender distribution of communicators in press conferences and their mentions in tweets, women communicators remain a minority across all countries in the sample. This is in line with recent findings on the representation of women in crisis leadership (Wegner, 2025). Women comprised approximately 32% of communicators at press conferences, a figure that mirrors their overall representation in referenced tweets (see Figure 2). In most countries, the share of women mentioned in tweets corresponds

closely to their presence at press conferences. However, Spain presents an interesting case: Although women made up 44% of communicators, they accounted for 57% of the references in tweets, indicating a higher visibility in social media discourse.

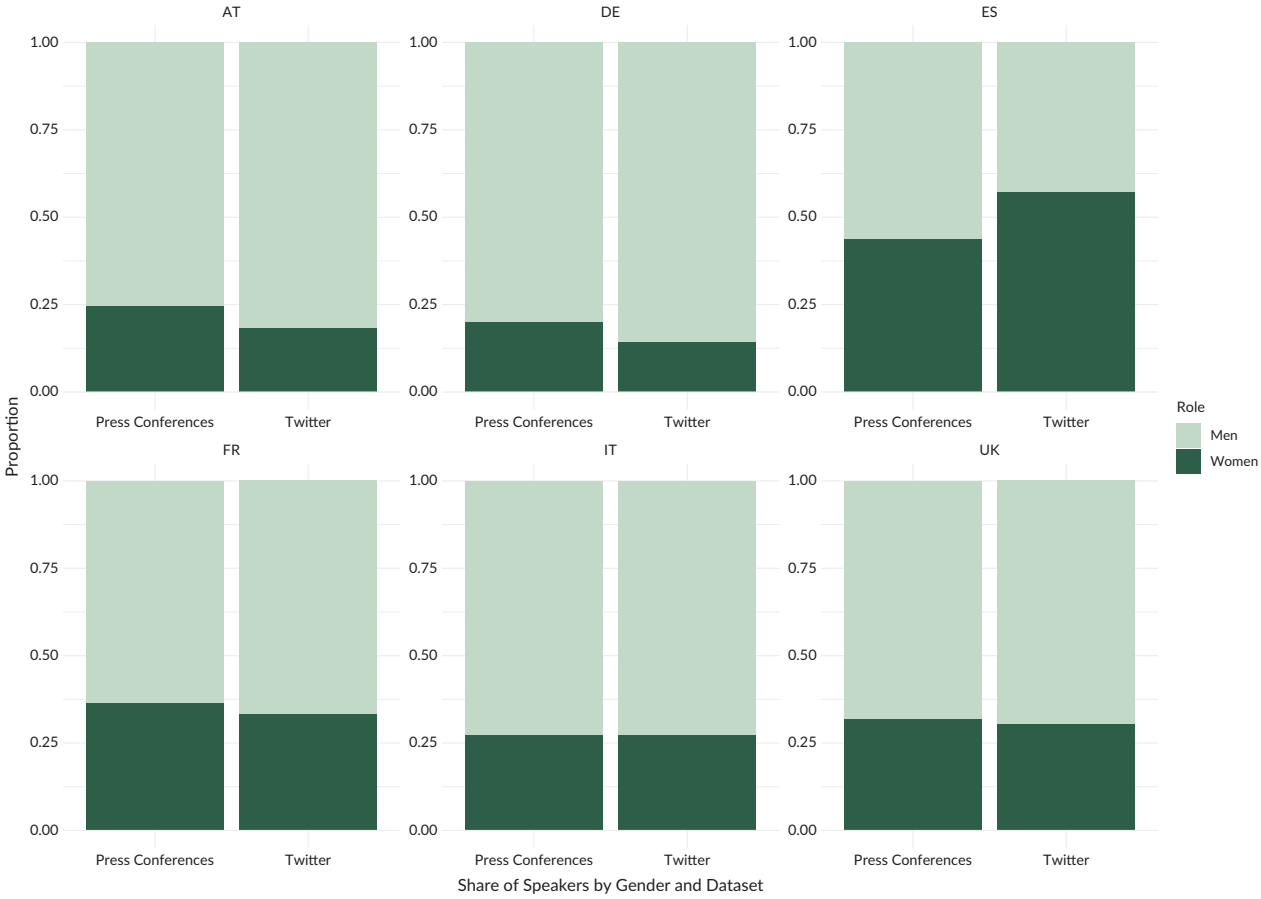


Figure 2. Comparison of communicator gender composition in press conferences and Twitter mentions by country.

A deeper analysis of the volume of speech delivered by men and women communicators reveals a more nuanced picture. In several countries, the share of women communicators does not correspond with the share of content they delivered, which is often higher. For instance, in Germany, women constituted 20% of communicators but were responsible for 48% of the content, while in France, they made up about 37% of communicators but accounted for 46% of content.

Addressing the hypotheses, Table 1 shows the results of two mixed-effects logistic regression models, with the outcome variable modeled as a binary response and random effects for countries of origin. The intra-cluster correlation (ICC) suggests that a multilevel mixed-effects model is more appropriate than a linear regression without random effects. In model 1, 23% of the variance is attributed to differences between countries, while the remaining 77% stems from individual-level variation or other unexplained factors. In model 2, the ICC is lower, with only 10% of the variance explained at the country level and the remaining 90% being due to individual-level variation or other unexplained factors. Despite the lower ICC in model 2, the main independent variables remain significant when estimated using a standard linear regression without random effects (see Table A4 in the Supplementary File). The dependent variable in both models is binary, indicating whether a

tweet was classified as expressing positive sentiment (1) or not (0). All continuous independent variables were standardized to a mean of zero and a standard deviation of 1. Both models include a random intercept for the communicator's country to account for unobserved country-level differences.

Table 1. Mixed-effects logistic regression models.

	Dependent variable: Positive sentiment			
	Model 1		Model 2	
	Odds Ratio	95% CI	Odds Ratio	95% CI
Role (politician)	0.586***	[0.407, 0.843]		
Role (expert)	1.523*	[0.994, 2.332]		
Trust in scientists	0.934	[0.807, 1.080]		
Gender (women)			1.520***	[1.227, 1.882]
Deaths weekly	1.134***	[1.049, 1.226]	1.085*	[0.999, 1.178]
Days since first presscon	1.022	[0.948, 1.102]	1.023	[0.948, 1.103]
Gender (women): Deaths weekly			1.259**	[1.053, 1.505]
Trust in gov	1.076	[0.947, 1.222]	1.016	[0.912, 1.130]
Women in parliament			0.886	[0.766, 1.024]
Constant	0.124***	[0.068, 0.222]	0.080***	[0.058, 0.110]
Observations	12,718		12,718	
Akaike Information Criterion	6,811.623		6,838.503	
ICC	0.2345503		0.09865835	

Notes: * $p < 0.1$; ** $p < 0.05$; *** $p < 0.01$; both models significantly improve upon their respective null models (Model 1: $\chi^2(6) = 68.33$, $p < 0.001$; Model 2: $\chi^2(6) = 41.44$, $p < 0.001$).

Model 1 focuses on the role of communicators, testing whether positive valence varies depending on whether the communicator is a politician, an expert, or another type of communicator. The key independent variable is the communicator's role (coded as 0 = other, 1 = politician, 2 = expert). Hypothesis 1 predicted that social media posts referencing communicators in political roles would be less likely to express positive sentiment compared to other communicators, based on prior findings that political actors may be perceived as driven by political motives rather than public concern. The results support this hypothesis: Tweets referencing politicians are significantly less likely to express positive sentiment compared to those referencing other types of communicators. Specifically, the odds of positive expressions are about 41% lower when the referenced communicator is a politician (odds ratio = 0.586, $p < 0.01$). Considering all the tweets in the sample, if one of these tweets names a speaker that is not a politician or expert and another tweet names a politician, the second tweet is substantially less likely to reference the speaker favorably.

Hypothesis 2 expected that social media posts referencing communicators in expert roles would be more likely to express positive sentiment, based on research suggesting that experts are perceived as more objective and competent. The results support this hypothesis: Social media posts referencing expert communicators are significantly more likely to express positive valence compared to those referencing other types of communicators. Specifically, the odds of positive sentiment are about 52% higher when the referenced communicator is an expert (odds ratio = 1.523, $p < 0.1$). Considering all the tweets in the sample, if one tweet mentions a speaker who is neither a politician nor an expert, and another tweet mentions an

expert, the latter is more likely to be favorable toward that speaker. This difference reflects a noticeable increase in the odds of positive expressions when the communicator is an expert.

Beyond communicator roles, the findings suggest that preexisting trust in government and in scientists are not significantly associated with affective expressions in social media posts. Neither is the number of days passed since the first press conference, indicating that there is no change over time. However, the severity of the crisis does play a role. The number of Covid-19-related deaths is positively and significantly associated with positive expressions towards communicators (odds ratio = 1.134, $p < 0.01$), indicating that as the crisis intensifies, people discussed them more favorably. Overall, tweets referencing politicians were less likely to contain favorable expressions compared to non-politician and non-expert communicators. Conversely, experts were more frequently associated with positive expressions. This finding supports hypotheses 1 and 2. Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of predicted probabilities that a tweet expresses positive sentiment, based on the logistic regression model. The plot compares these predicted probabilities across communicator roles: politician, expert, and other. The predicted probability of positive expressions is lowest in tweets referencing politicians, and highest for those referencing experts. Tweets mentioning other communicators occupy an intermediate position between these two groups.

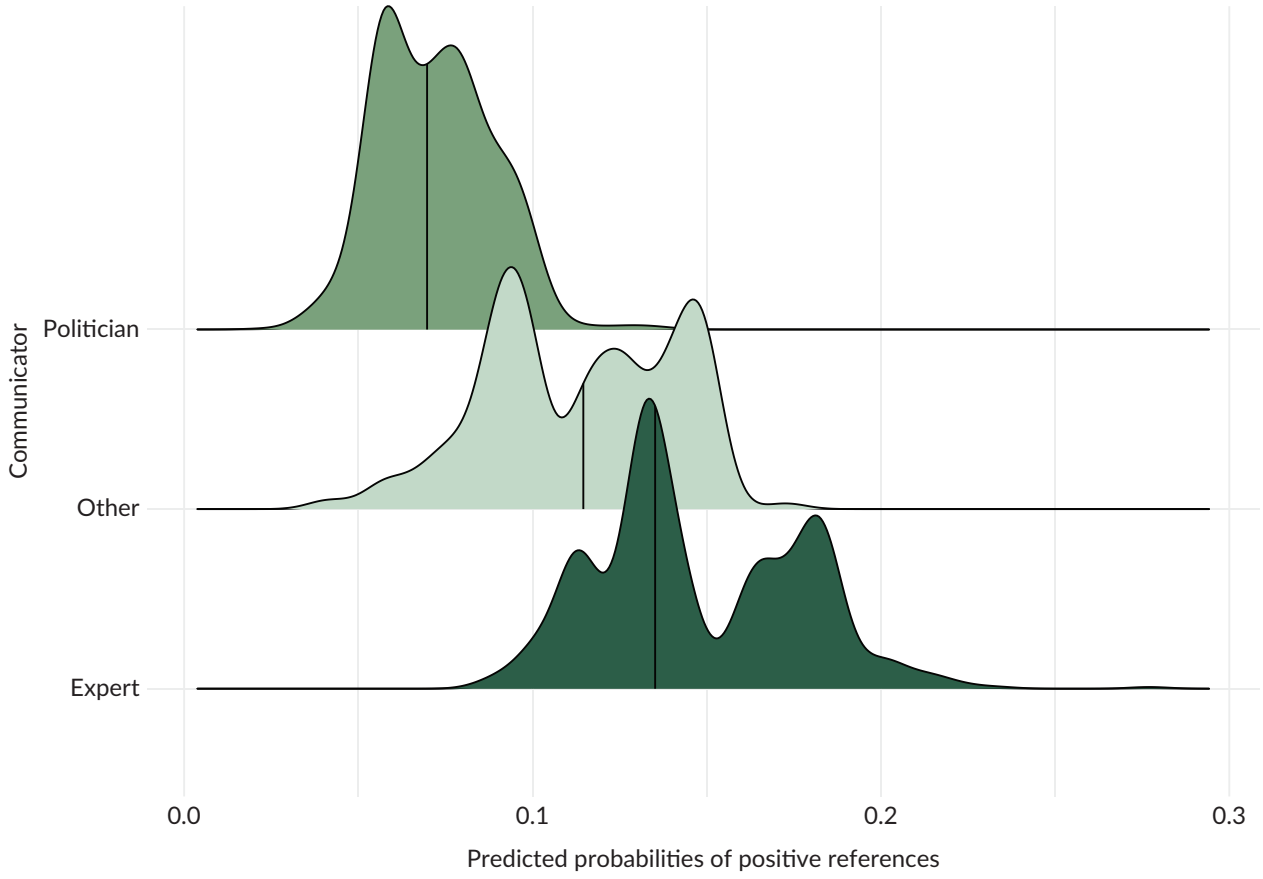


Figure 3. Likelihood of positive expressions in tweets towards communicator roles. Predicted probabilities are generated for each tweet using the estimates of model 1 and represent the likelihood, on a scale from 0 to 1, that a given tweet contains positive sentiment toward the speaker. Density curves illustrate how positive expressions are more or less likely depending on who communicates in the press conference. The x-axis reflects the predicted probability of positive expressions and the y-axis lists the communicator role categories.

Model 2 in Table 1 assesses the relationship between the communicator's gender and positive affective responses, including whether gender interacts with the severity of the crisis. The key independent variable is communicator gender (coded as 0 = man, 1 = woman). An interaction term between communicator gender and weekly deaths tests whether the effect of gender on positive sentiment toward the communicator varies with the severity of the crisis. Hypothesis 3a posits that posts referencing women communicators would be more likely to express positive sentiment compared to those referencing men communicators. The results support this hypothesis: Social media posts that mention women communicators are about 1.5 times more likely to express positive sentiment than those that mention men communicators (odds ratio = 1.52, $p < 0.01$). In other words, the odds of a post expressing positive sentiment are 52% higher when a woman communicator is referenced, holding other factors constant. Figure 4 presents the distribution of predicted probabilities that any tweet expresses positive sentiment by communicator gender.

Beyond this direct effect, hypothesis 3b draws on the notion of a gendered trust advantage, suggesting that favorable sentiment toward women communicators would increase as crisis severity intensified. To test this, the model includes an interaction between communicator gender and crisis severity, measured by weekly Covid-related deaths. The results show that as the severity of the crisis increases, the gender effect

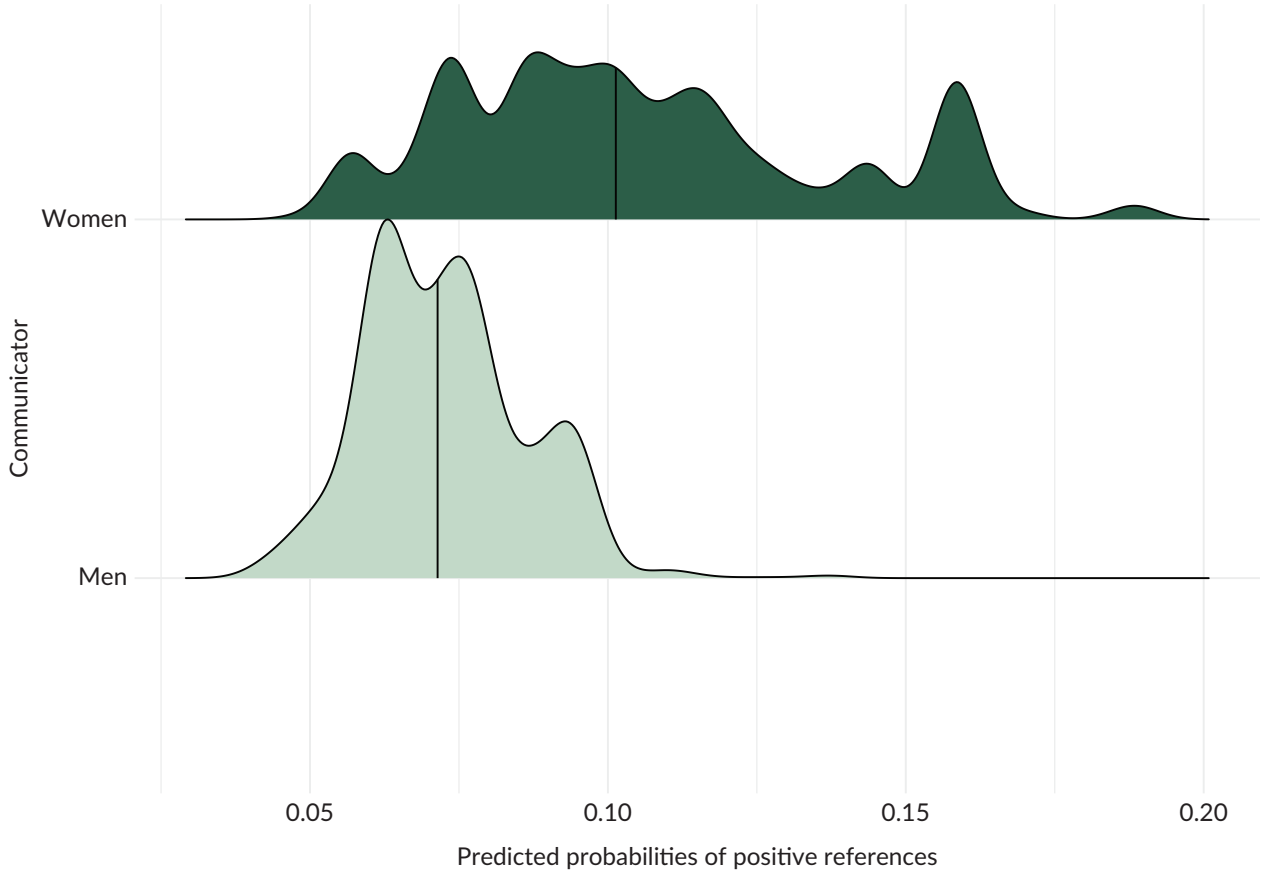


Figure 4. Likelihood of positive expressions in tweets towards communicator gender. The predicted probabilities are derived from the estimates of model 2 and represent the model-estimated likelihood that each tweet expresses positive sentiment, given the characteristics of the communicator and contextual controls. Density curves compare the distributions for men and women communicators. The x-axis shows the predicted probability of positive expressions, while the y-axis separates the distribution by gender.

becomes stronger: For each one standard deviation increase in weekly Covid-related deaths, the odds that a post referencing a woman expresses positive sentiment increase by 26% compared to a post referencing a man (odds ratio = 1.259, $p < 0.01$). The model also controls for the time elapsed since the first Covid-related press conference, which does not yield a significant effect. This suggests that the effect of crisis severity on favorable expressions is not merely a function of time progression. Additionally, the model includes the proportion of women in national parliaments as a control variable, which does not show a significant effect. When tested for the interaction of communicator role and gender, the models did not yield any significant effects and were therefore excluded from the final model (see Table A8 in the Supplementary File).

Observing trends over the course of the pandemic reveals that affective patterns in tweets shifted as the crisis progressed and its impacts became more evident. Initially, men communicators received stronger positive expressions while the public remained relatively unaffected, whereas women communicators faced more negative expressions. As damage reports, such as rising death rates, became apparent, positive sentiment towards women increased, while sentiment toward men steadily declined. During periods of peak mortality, tweets were more likely to express positive sentiment toward women than men. However, as the pandemic came under control and the initial wave subsided, the advantage for women did not persist, as discussions increasingly favored men again (see Figure 5 for a comparison of positive expression toward men and women communicators in contrast to increasing numbers of Covid-related deaths).

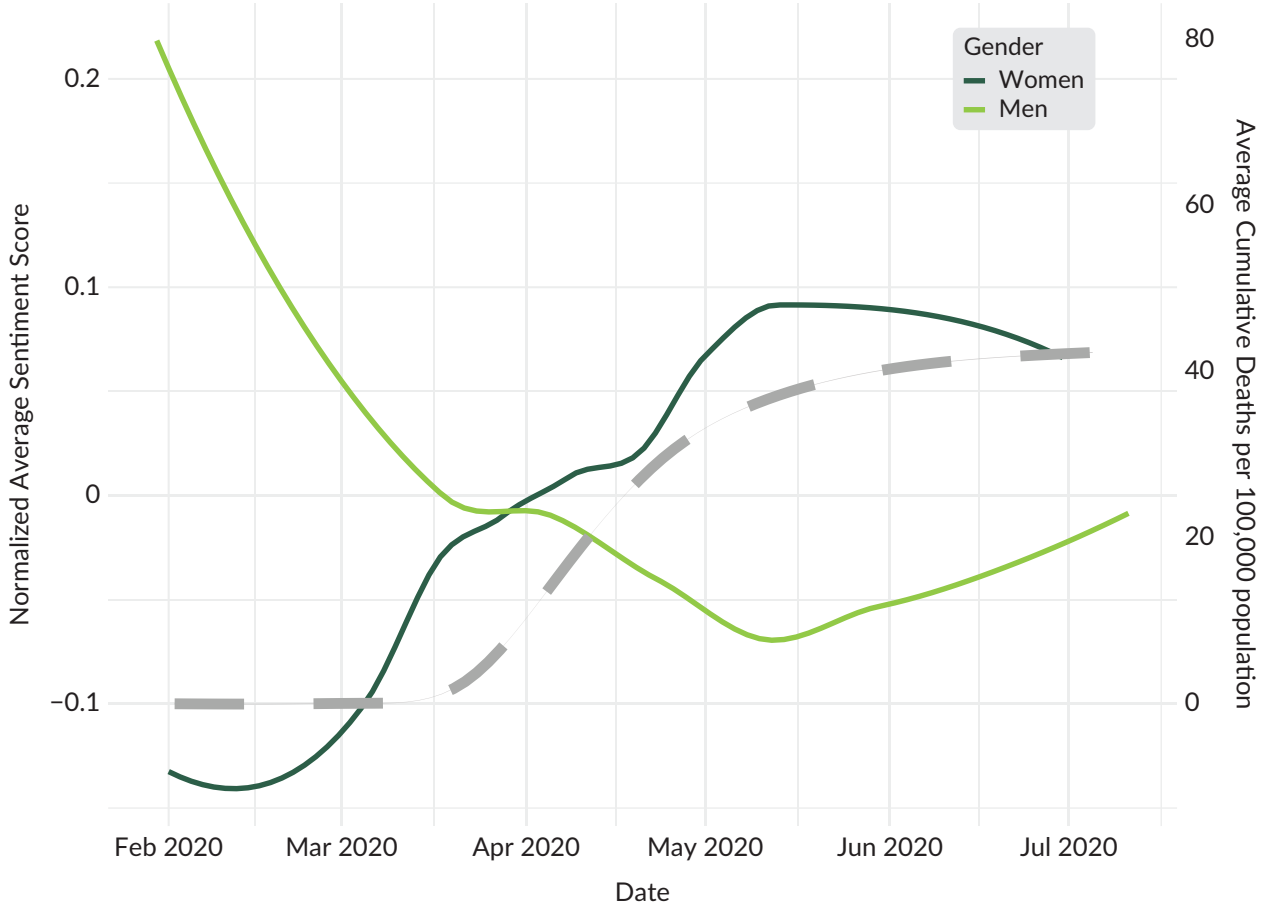


Figure 5. Average affective responses toward men and women communicators and cumulative Covid-related deaths.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the role of communicators in shaping affective responses, which may inform our understanding of broader trust formation in government communication, particularly during crises. By focusing on expressions of sentiment in online discourse, the study examines how public evaluations, whether supportive or critical, are tied to the characteristics of those delivering crisis communication. Sentiment, understood here as an affective response expressed through language, plays a particularly important role in digital environments where communication is rapid, spontaneous, and often emotionally charged. While positive sentiment is not equivalent to trust, prior research suggests that such affective expressions may contribute to broader evaluations of communicators, including orientations that influence trust over time (Alsaid et al., 2023; Bertsou, 2019; Jennings et al., 2021).

During crises, social media platforms often serve as key arenas of discourse, where users rarely elaborate on the reason for their evaluations but instead respond spontaneously. This makes affective expressions a critical lens for understanding how communicator perceptions evolve during crises. This approach also enables a large-scale, real-time analysis of how citizens express favorable or skeptical orientations toward government communicators in everyday political discourse. While the Covid-19 pandemic serves as the focal case study, the results highlight broader patterns applicable to future crises, such as natural disasters, economic shocks, and public health emergencies.

First, the study reinforces the importance of combining expert and political communication during crises. The findings on affective expressions on Twitter are consistent with the longstanding view that experts, particularly scientists and health professionals, are more likely to be perceived favorably than politicians when speaking on behalf of a government, especially in times of crisis. One possible explanation, in line with earlier work, is that experts are often perceived as neutral and evidence-based, presenting information seen as objective and free from political motives. In contrast, research suggests that politicians may be perceived as less trustworthy due to assumptions about self-serving or politically strategic behavior (Yousefinaghani et al., 2022). This study therefore does not confirm what other scholars have termed the "rally effect" (Lehrer et al., 2024; Schnabel et al., 2024) when the public rallies behind the incumbent leaders. However, there is an ongoing debate on this effect and how long it lasts. Future research could explore more fine-grained phases of crises to better understand how sentiment toward politicians develops.

Second, the study suggests that gender relates to how communicators are discussed in social media contexts. Women communicators, though underrepresented at press conferences (Wegner, 2025), appear to be more likely to evoke positive affective responses as crises intensify. This is consistent with findings by prior research on broader societal expectations that associate women with empathy, care, and relational communication styles—traits that may be particularly valued in high-stress situations (Post et al., 2019; Sergent & Stajkovic, 2020). This trend is consistent with what some scholars have called a "trust advantage" for women in leadership, though this study captures affective responses rather than trust itself. This suggests that affective responses toward crisis communicators are shaped not only by the characteristics and stereotypes associated with gender but also by the evolving context of the crisis and the public's needs. Governments might consider diversifying speaker roles, particularly during critical phases, and expanding women communicators' roles to boost public support by leveraging relational qualities in times of uncertainty.

Third, as governments navigate future crises, managing public perceptions on social media is essential. Online platforms can both enhance and undermine confidence in authorities, making it critical for governments to monitor these platforms closely and engage with users proactively. Platforms like X provide real-time feedback loops that can amplify or erode confidence depending on how communicators are perceived, highlighting the need for adaptable messaging strategies. The public's immediate reaction to press conferences, as observed in this study, illustrate how social media reflects collective interpretations of government communication. This dynamic makes social media not only a strategic tool for governments but also a valuable resource for studying public sentiment patterns in real time, offering insights that can inform more effective crisis communication.

Trust in information sources is a cornerstone of democratic legitimacy, as democracies rely on informed and engaged citizens. Yet, this trust is increasingly challenged by transformations in media use: Digitalization, information abundance, and the proliferation of diverse media have reshaped how people access information (Shehata & Strömbäck, 2022; Splendore et al., 2024). In this shifting landscape, governments take on a dual role, not only as political actors but also as key sources of information, especially during challenging times that demand timely guidance. This study contributes to understanding what happens when governments step into this informational role, particularly on social media, and how public affective responses vary depending on who delivers the message.

That experts and women communicators tend to be referenced more positively, while politicians receive less favorable evaluations, underscores the importance of messenger characteristics in shaping perceptions of credibility. For governments, this highlights the importance of diversifying and strategically composing communication teams—not just what is said, but who says it matters. As routine communication increasingly blends with polarized contexts online, aligning messenger strategies with public expectations becomes crucial for maintaining democratic legitimacy. By understanding how expertise, political leadership, and gender dynamics intersect in government communication, governments can design more effective strategies to build and maintain support in challenging times.

Despite these contributions, the study has several limitations. First, while this study investigates sentiment as an affective expression, potentially related to broader trust formation, this operationalization captures only a narrow aspect of the complex trust construct. Although sentiment analysis enables scalable, real-time insights, it does not reflect the cognitive or behavioral components of trust. Nonetheless, the observed correlation between emotional expressions and trust (Bertsou, 2019; Jennings et al., 2021) supports this approach as a meaningful, though partial, window into public orientations. Future research could integrate survey, experiment, or interview-based methods to examine how emotional responses on social media relate to deeper trust orientations.

Second, the rapidly evolving nature of social media platforms suggests that future studies should examine how changes in platform algorithms and user behavior influence public sentiment and perceived communicator credibility. It is important to note that affective expressions on social media reflect the views of specific user groups rather than the general population, as social media platforms tend to attract particular demographics and may not provide a representative sample of the broader public.

Third, while this study focuses on roles and speaker characteristics, particularly political versus expert identity and gender, future work could explore in more detail how individual speakers, beyond their roles,

shape sentiment. The data examined in this study includes a wide variety of actors, from high-ranking politicians and public health officials to religious leaders and private-sector representatives. These distinctions suggest different symbolic functions that could yield further insights into how communicative authority is constructed during crises.

Lastly, future research could examine how the linguistic framing of crisis messages, both by governments and the public, interacts with messenger characteristics to influence sentiment and trust. Exploring how language, emotion, and perceived authority intersect may deepen the understanding of how trust is formed and maintained in digitally mediated crisis communication.

Acknowledgments

I want to thank the anonymous reviewers and the academic editors for their constructive and thoughtful feedback and their engagement in improving the article. I also thank my project team at the University of Innsbruck, as well as Fiona Nordone, for her support in coding.

Funding

This research was funded in whole by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF) 10.55776/P34225. Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Innsbruck and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The data on press conferences are available at Hayek et al. (2024). Additional materials and replication data can be requested from the author.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT was used for language editing purposes.

Supplementary Material

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

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10451
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10451

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Outsourced Propaganda: The Role of Journalists in China's Government Social Media

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Submitted: 31 March 2025 **Accepted:** 6 August 2025 **Published:** 11 September 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

This research explores an underexamined aspect of government communication—the role of journalists as outsourced propaganda content producers in the Chinese context. Based on 15 semi-structured interviews with journalists who have first-hand experience managing outsourced government social media accounts, and grounded in boundary work theory, this study examines how journalists navigate the tension between journalism and propaganda in relation to their role identity, work routines, and professional values. Findings reveal that outsourced journalists, often referred to as *Xiaobian*, occupy a contested hybrid position. Their identity negotiation is constrained by dual pressures from both government agencies and news organizations, leaving limited room for professional autonomy. In their daily practices, bureaucratic logic takes precedence over journalistic logic, intensifying the tension between serving the state and serving the public. These dynamics highlight journalism's boundary crossing in the digital era, shaped by changing economic and political conditions within the media landscape.

Keywords

boundary work; China; government communication; journalism; propaganda; social media

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of digital technologies, social media has emerged as an important force reshaping the communication ecosystem between governments and their citizens (Guo et al., 2025; Kavanaugh et al., 2012). Governments around the world increasingly utilize social media not only to disseminate information but also to engage with citizens and communities, fostering transparency and responsiveness (Criado et al., 2013; DePaula et al., 2018). The adoption of social media by governments is

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often regarded as a marker of democracy and modernity, contributing to the development of digital and smart governance (Bonsón et al., 2016; Janowski, 2015). Additionally, social media serves as a public forum for citizens to participate in public discussion, facilitating government deliberation and indicating the growth of civil society (Eltantawy & Wiest, 2011; Yuan et al., 2023). However, some less optimistic scholars contend that social media can be an instrument of repression in the hands of autocrats, further restricting social and political liberty (Roberts & Oosterom, 2024). While previous studies have primarily examined government social media adoption and influences, little attention has been given to the producers of government messaging, especially those working outside the formal government structures, limiting our understanding of the operational dynamics behind government social media. This study addresses this gap by exploring how journalists in China are outsourced to manage and produce content for government social media accounts.

Like governments worldwide, the Chinese government, from the central to the local, has placed considerable emphasis on adopting and managing social media (Yuan et al., 2023). On the one hand, the government tightens censorship on social media to silence dissenting voices and limit collective action through more sophisticated technological systems (Tai & Fu, 2020). On the other hand, the government also actively engages in the social media sphere by establishing official accounts to amplify its agenda and shape public discourse (Guo et al., 2025). In early 2013, the central government underscored the significance of social media as a new channel of government communication, promoting information dissemination and public engagement aimed at enhancing public trust and maintaining political legitimacy (Schlæger & Jiang, 2014). As of 2024, over 90,000 government Weibo accounts (China Internet Network Information Center, 2025) and 500,000 government WeChat accounts (Xie, 2024) have been launched across the country, covering various government levels and divisions. Due to constraints in human resources and professional expertise, government agencies tend to outsource the operation of their social media accounts to media organizations, enlisting journalists to work on government communication on their behalf (Xie, 2024). Simultaneously, traditionally functioning as mouthpieces of the government or "watchdog on Party's leashes" (Zhao, 2000), Chinese state media has also been embracing social media and restyling "hard propaganda" to "soft propaganda," producing entertaining and aesthetic content for social media users (Zhu & Fu, 2024; Zou, 2021). Beyond opening press-owned social media accounts, news organizations also outsource their journalistic staff to assist the government's march in the online world. While existing studies have identified the collaborative relationship between media organizations and government agencies in government communication (Wang, 2023), few empirical studies have examined the daily practices of contracted and outsourced journalists in this context. As professional content producers, journalists play an important role in mediating messages, framing narratives, and constructing discourses. Their practices directly influence the effectiveness of government communication and shape public perceptions of government performance. Meanwhile, in the Chinese context, the boundaries between journalism, public relations (PR), and propaganda are increasingly blurred and contested, rendering journalistic roles both volatile and complex (Guan et al., 2017; Wang & Li, 2024). Studying the tensions experienced by journalists in this space not only sheds light on how government communication is being restructured amid intensified political control and accelerated digital transformation but also provides insights into evolving media-state relations and the redefinition of boundaries of journalism in semi-authoritarian systems.

The study begins with a review of government social media and theoretical discussions on boundary work and Chinese media. Next, after detailing the method of the research, we present our analysis and research findings, examining how outsourced journalists operate government social media and negotiate the intersection of

bureaucratic and journalistic boundaries. Finally, we discuss the implications of these findings and the broader significance of journalistic involvement in government communication.

2. Government Social Media and the Chinese Context

With the rapid advancement of digital infrastructure and the widespread adoption of the internet, social media has become an essential tool in government communication, contributing to the rise of e-government and digital government (Janowski, 2015; Khan et al., 2020). Due to its immediacy and interactivity, social media has reshaped the relationship between individuals, communities, and various levels of government (DePaula et al., 2018). For governments, it serves as a modern channel for information dissemination and service provision, symbolizing efficiency and transparency (Bonsón et al., 2016). Simultaneously, it empowers citizens to actively participate in addressing social issues, fostering collaborative governance (Criado & Villodre, 2023; Linders, 2012). Existing studies on government social media may be observed from the perspectives of governments or citizens.

From the governmental standpoint, scholars have explored social media adoption at various administrative levels, examining influencing factors, implementation practices, and content characteristics. Criado and Villodre (2021) argue that goals of transparency, participation, and collaboration often drive public administration's social media adoption. Through social media, local governments can become more transparent and accessible, encouraging greater public engagement in civic affairs (Gao & Lee, 2017). It is believed that social media could foster a sense of connectedness between governments and citizens, enabling two-way, dialogic relationships that contribute to political legitimacy (Bonsón et al., 2016; Criado & Villodre, 2021). Many developed countries leverage social media to enhance open government practices, increase transparency, and build public trust (Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Khan et al., 2020). However, there are also scholars who criticize this dynamic for creating an omnipresent public and an omnipresent administration, suggesting that the emphasis on constant visibility and interaction prioritizes performative engagement over meaningful, collaborative problem-solving (Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014). Some scholars further contend that social media can be used by authoritarian governments as a tool for disseminating propaganda, creating distractions, and spreading misinformation to promote the policies of a political party (DePaula & Hansson, 2025) and to maintain authoritarian control (Dal & Nisbet, 2022).

From the citizen perspective, scholarship has concentrated on examining public perceptions of government social media, particularly the effects and outcomes of government communication. Studies indicate that civic engagement through social media can significantly increase institutional trust while simultaneously amplifying citizens' demands for civic action to address social issues (Criado & Villodre, 2023; Warren et al., 2014). Eltantawy and Wiest (2011) contend that citizen participation in government social media facilitates the emergence of civil society and a vibrant public sphere. However, it is also found that public engagement with government platforms often falls short of expectations. For example, a notable decline in public interaction with local governments is typically observed after elections (Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018). Additionally, only a minority of individuals prefer communicating with the government through social media and their participation often lacks interactivity (Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014). This reluctance may stem from a disconnect between what local governments offer on social media and citizens' expectations (Criado & Villodre, 2023). Moreover, clickbait titles, excessively lengthy content, and repetitive information contribute to information avoidance behavior which is also found to correlate with citizens' perceptions of

governmental transparency, responsiveness, and their overall sentiment toward government (Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2018).

Existing studies predominantly focus on liberal democratic societies where government-citizen interactions on social media are often perceived as enhancing democracy (Bonsón et al., 2016). In contrast, studies on (semi-)authoritarian contexts remain limited, often overlooking the fact that social media does not solely facilitate democratic engagement; it can also be harnessed to advance digital authoritarianism (Polyakova & Meserole, 2019). Particularly in China, a single-party regime, social media is not only a channel for information dissemination but also a tool for propaganda aimed at cultivating compliant citizen behaviors (Chen et al., 2024). Although critical perspectives on government use of social media have emerged (Hansson & Page, 2023; Zavattaro & Sementelli, 2014), the literature on government communication has yet to fully explore how government social media is managed and operated in practice, particularly in the context of increasing state-sponsored disinformation which has had global repercussions (Echeverría et al., 2025). Moreover, existing studies tend to operate under the assumption that government communication involves only governments and citizens, leaving the potential role of third-party actors in the production process underexplored. This oversight hinders a comprehensive understanding of government communication. Consequently, it is essential to explore the roles and positions these actors occupy and how they shape the dynamics of government-citizen interaction.

Unlike Western liberal societies, where journalism enjoys a high degree of autonomy and remains distinct from government communication, Chinese journalism, operating under a one-party semi-authoritarian regime, is subject to strong state intervention (Guan et al., 2017; Zhao, 2000). Previous studies have shown that, as the mouthpiece of the Chinese Communist Party, state media have played a significant role in propaganda across various historical periods (Wang, 2016; Xu & He, 2024). In the digital era, many media organizations have adapted their propaganda styles and strategies, marking a shift toward "soft propaganda" (Zhu & Fu, 2024; Zou, 2021). More recently, the Chinese government has moved beyond traditional media, placing significant emphasis on using social media for government communication, viewing it as a more effective means of advancing digital governance and enhancing political messaging. WeChat, the country's largest social media platform, boasts over one billion monthly active users and is considered one of the most influential communication channels in China. Since 2012, WeChat has offered a subscription account feature (*Weixin Gongzhonghao*), which not only enables individuals to become content creators or *Zimeiti* (personal media) operators (Fang, 2021), thereby fostering a decentralized media environment, but also allows organizations—including government agencies—to bypass traditional media gatekeeping and directly disseminate information. Weibo, similar to X (formerly Twitter), has nearly 600 million monthly active users and serves as another major platform. Its decentralized and open architecture facilitates limited political engagement and public expression, even within China's restrictive communicative environment (Wu, 2018).

Recent statistics indicate that more than 90,000 government-affiliated accounts have been launched across Weibo and WeChat (China Internet Network Information Center, 2025). However, due to a shortage of personnel and expertise in social media management, many Chinese government departments have outsourced the operation of their social media accounts to news organizations. At the same time, media outlets are grappling with structural challenges brought about by digital transformation, including declining readership and advertising revenues since the end of the "golden age" (Wang & Sparks, 2019). In response, legacy media have sought new strategies to transform their business models and generate income (Long &

Shao, 2021). Collaborating with government agencies to manage official social media accounts has emerged as a strategy not only to strengthen ties with the government but also to establish a new revenue stream (Xu & He, 2024). Recent studies suggest that providing diversified outsourced services to governments has become an innovative approach for party newspapers (Long & Shao, 2021; Xu & He, 2024). However, little is known about how these services are operationalized or how they influence government communication. This study offers insights into this issue by examining the mechanisms of outsourced government social media operations, with a particular focus on the role of journalists in government communication through the lens of boundary work.

3. Boundary Work in Journalism

3. Boundary Work in Journalism Boundary work was originally conceptualized to examine how scientists establish their legitimacy as knowledge producers, distinguishing themselves from religion and pseudoscience (Gieryn, 1983). In the field of journalism, journalists' boundary work often revolves around three key domains: participation (who qualifies as a journalist); practices (what constitutes journalistic work); and professionalism (how journalists establish a distinct community with specialized knowledge; Carlson, 2015). These boundaries are not stable, pre-determined structures but rather contextual and fluid cultural constructions requiring constant negotiation (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014, p. 391).

The rise of digital technology, particularly social media, has intensified debate over journalistic boundaries leading to the emergence of terms such as "blurring boundaries" (Liu & Berkowitz, 2020; Loosen, 2015) and "shifting boundaries" (Blaagaard, 2013; Cheng & Tandoc, 2022). One of the most significant boundary works in journalism concerns the identity of participating actors. The rise of citizen journalism and participatory journalism has challenged traditional notions of journalistic authority as non-professionals engage in news production (Blaagaard, 2013). Konieczna et al. (2018) suggest that journalists see citizen participation as a supplement to professional journalism practices rather than giving it intrinsic worth for its own sake. Hamm (2024) highlights how collaborations between citizens, scientists, and journalists are producing new forms of news objects, ultimately contributing to the empowerment of both journalism and the public. At the same time, numerous peripheral actors have emerged in the field of journalism, including mobile app designers, programmers, and web analytics managers, all of whom increasingly influence the process of news production (Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018). Although these interlopers play an expanding role in journalism, they remain excluded from traditional definitions of journalistic actors and are often viewed as dissolving established metajournalistic discourse (de-Lima-Santos & Mesquita, 2023; Holton & Belair-Gagnon, 2018). This expansion of journalistic participation reflects a broader trend of boundary negotiation where legitimacy is contested and redefined in response to technological and societal transformations.

A second dimension of boundary work in journalism involves defining what constitutes journalistic practice. In the context of ongoing economic crises, journalists are often required to take on non-editorial tasks such as producing off-agenda content to secure funding from private foundations (Scott et al., 2019). The expansion of journalistic boundaries is shaped not only by technological disruption and economic pressures (Wang, 2023) but also by increasing political polarization (de-Lima-Santos & Mesquita, 2023). For instance, investigative journalists in Latin America must incorporate personal security measures into their daily routines as a means of self-protection in politically hostile environments (de-Lima-Santos & Mesquita, 2023). Meanwhile, in China, political journalists increasingly face the new requirement of serving as policy

consultants for the government, acting as think tanks alongside their regular news reporting duties, reflecting the deepening symbiotic relationship between the press and the state (Wang & Yin, 2024). These adaptations illustrate the dynamism of boundary work, demonstrating how journalistic practices are shaped and reshaped in response to external pressures.

In terms of professionalism, journalism as a distinct profession is increasingly disrupted by the convergence of communication fields. Prior research has highlighted the blurring boundaries between journalism and PR, a process often referred to as the "PR-ization" of the media (Macnamara, 2016; Weder et al., 2023). Shifting professional conditions have prompted many journalists to transition into PR, a domain that requires similar skills and thus facilitates role negotiation (Fisher, 2016). Freelance journalists who simultaneously work in PR often experience dual-role conflicts (Viererbl & Koch, 2021). To navigate these tensions, they tend to adopt preventative strategies aimed at avoiding inter-role conflict such as separating topics, selectively choosing clients, and employing passive shielding techniques. When such strategies fail or are not feasible, they may instead merge professional roles, downplay their PR work, or deflect responsibility as a way of managing these conflicts (Fröhlich et al., 2013). Even journalists who fully transition into PR roles often retain a journalistic self-conception which can clash with the professional norms and expectations specific to PR (Viererbl & Koch, 2021). Although moonlighting staff frequently perceive themselves primarily as journalists (Fröhlich et al., 2013), their work practices increasingly reflect features of professional convergence, signaling a broader erosion of boundaries between journalistic and PR roles (Weder et al., 2023).

The boundaries of Chinese journalism are shaped by the interplay of state intervention, market commercialization, and technological innovation. Due to stringent media control, the scope of investigative journalism is severely restricted (Tong, 2019), leading to an increasing tolerance for the embrace of PR practices (Qiu & Lou, 2022). In response to declining advertising revenues and readership, the distinction between editorial and commercial spheres has become blurred, illustrating that journalists are increasingly subordinated to the demands of revenue generation rather than prioritizing news reporting (Wang & Sparks, 2019). By incorporating reflexivity and transparency into their reporting practices, investigative journalists continue to negotiate and articulate their professional identities (Meng & Zhang, 2022). The rise of digital media has further diminished journalists' ability to defend these boundaries with journalists now positioned as both custodians of professionalism and marginalized voices in shaping public opinion (Wang & Li, 2024). Confronted with these pressures, Chinese journalism's boundary work remains a dynamic and competitive process. This boundary negotiation is particularly demanding among outsourced journalists who are responsible for managing government social media accounts. Drawing on boundary work theory, this study sought to explore how journalists negotiate their professional role within the bureaucratic political sphere. Specifically, two research questions were asked:

> RQ1: How do journalists operate outsourced government social media?
>
> RQ2: How do journalists negotiate the boundaries between politics and journalism during these processes?

4. Method

To address the research questions, this study adopted semi-structured, in-depth interviews as the research method. The study focuses on Group Z, a major media conglomerate located in a southeastern city in China that hosts 16 outlets: nine newspapers, five magazines, and two news apps. Since 2015, this media group has provided services for managing government-affiliated social media accounts. Located in one of China's most economically developed cities, where the government places significant emphasis on the development of official social media, Group Z plays a key role in outsourcing journalists to assist with government communication. By 2024, statistics indicated that 297 government-operated social media accounts were active in the city, ranking among the highest in the country. Among these, WeChat accounts are particularly prominent. One notable example is the WeChat account of a local health department, which has amassed nearly 10 million followers. The widespread outsourcing of these accounts to Group Z underscores the involvement of journalistic professionals in producing content for government social media. These dynamics make Group Z an ideal research site for examining outsourced government social media operations.

4.1. Data Collection

According to the ranking of government social media accounts released by Group Z every month, we identified 45 outsourced journalistic professionals. The interviews were conducted from February 2024 to January 2025 through a snowball sampling approach. One of the authors who had a similar experience of operating government social media first reached five participants through a working connection and then conducted the interviews. After the interviews, participants were invited to recommend other colleagues or friends who were also operating government social media. Ultimately, 15 of them, all with direct experience in operating government-affiliated social media, accepted our interview invitations.

To accommodate their personal situation and anonymity needs, five interviews were conducted in person and 10 via WeChat voice calls. Notably, two-thirds of the interviewees were female, reflecting the gender composition of this cohort as shown in the previous research (Chen, 2025). The interview guidelines focused on interviewees' experience in operating government social media, exploring three key topics: (a) daily practices, such as "how do you select topics for government social media?" and "what factors influence your decision?"; (b) identity perception, such as "do you consider yourself a journalist? Why or why not?"; and (c) understanding of government social media, such as "do you think government social media is helpful to citizens? Why or why not?" Interviews ranged from 32 to 76 minutes and were recorded with participant consent. All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim. For those (three participants) who preferred not to be audio recorded, we kept notes as much as we could.

4.2. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was performed to analyze the data. First, all the transcripts and notes were repeatedly read by two authors using the three-dimensional framework of journalistic boundary work (Carlson, 2015) and research questions as the initial code. After restructuring the transcripts, the researchers read them again to identify more concrete and specific themes that repeatedly emerged. This ultimately allowed the transcripts to be organized into three categories: (a) identity, (b) practice, and (c) professionalism. To better understand journalists' boundary work and their experience, we outline the

cooperation models at the beginning and their professional positioning at the end. To preserve contextual nuance, transcripts were analyzed in Chinese. Representative excerpts were lightly edited for clarity (e.g., removing stutters or repeated words), translated into English, and included in the findings as direct quotations. For anonymity, participants are identified as Interviewee 1, Interviewee 2, Interviewee 3, and so on.

5. Findings

5.1. The Context of Outsourced Government Social Media

The role of media in managing government social media accounts is closely linked to the decline in advertising revenues: "The press needs to survive first and be self-sustaining, so they need to expand their business. Running government social media is a 'one stone two birds' act" (Interviewee 9). The government's need to develop its social media presence and the media's need to explore new revenue streams and align with power have become increasingly intertwined, leading to the wider adoption of outsourced management of government social media.

Local governments typically adopt a "service procurement model" to outsource social media operations to media organizations. In this arrangement, the government functions as the "client" (*jiafang*), while media organizations serve as service providers (*yifang*) offering tailored solutions to meet the government's communication needs. As Interviewee 5 explained, under this model, "The government may simply view us as a vendor, and our role is to deliver high-quality services to meet the client's needs." Contracts for such projects are typically signed on an annual basis, adopting either the one-to-one or one-to-many model.

The one-to-one service model operates in two steps. First, government agencies in need of social media operation services initiate a public bidding process. The winning bidder, often a media organization, assigns a journalist to work directly within the government unit handling the daily operation of its social media accounts. In this model, one journalist serves one government department. Their responsibilities typically include information gathering, content production, visual design, and audience engagement. Government clients under this model in Group Z range from municipal, district, sub-district, to community levels, covering sectors such as education, law, and culture. In their daily routines, the outsourced journalists are primarily accountable to government agencies rather than their media organizations.

The one-to-many model refers to one journalist operating multiple government-outsourced social media accounts simultaneously. These journalists generally work within their media organizations and communicate with government departments remotely. The number of accounts assigned to each journalist depends on the profitability of the projects they manage. News organizations typically establish key performance indicators for journalists to meet. Among our interviewees, the busiest journalist (Interviewee 6) was responsible for operating four WeChat accounts affiliated with different government departments. Managing multiple accounts was perceived by outsourced journalists as a sign of competitiveness and profitability. Compared to their counterparts in the one-to-one model, journalists operating under the one-to-many model receive greater support from their news organizations.

Whether the government adopts a one-to-one or one-to-many collaboration model when outsourcing services to news organizations depends on its budget and the priority it places on social media adoption. In our case, City Z, where funding is relatively abundant, most government agencies prefer the one-to-one model. Three-quarters of our interviewees serve in the one-to-one model, aligning with the choice of governments.

5.2. Negotiating Boundaries

Carlson (2015, p. 9) suggests that there are "three areas of journalism around which boundary work occurs: participants, practices, and professionalism." Our research reveals that outsourced journalists operating government social media accounts occupy an intermediary position between news organizations and governmental institutions, requiring them to navigate tensions related to identity, practices, and professionalism.

5.2.1. Identity: "I am a *Xiaobian*, not a Journalist"

In the narratives of outsourced journalists, they often refer to themselves as *Xiaobian*, a term meaning "little editor." This title describes someone exclusively responsible for content production on social media. However, this label carries an identity tension due to its ambiguous connotation. Interviewee 9, who has worked in one-to-one service, noted:

> When working as a *Xiaobian*, I still feel like a journalist in my heart. I believe my content should serve the public. But the government simply treats us as service providers, here to cater to the "client-daddy" [*jiafang baba*]. Even though we perform journalistic tasks like interviewing, editing, and photography, they do not see us as real journalists.

Previous research shows that journalists assert their legitimacy as participants in the journalistic field by excluding user-generated content creators as non-professionals (Carlson & Berkowitz, 2014). However, in our case, outsourced journalists are institutionally categorized as *Xiaobian*—a term devoid of formal journalistic status. This demonstrates that the boundary work of journalists is not solely determined by journalists themselves but is also shaped by external factors, such as government regulations. Over time, these outsourced workers gradually internalize this redefinition. As Interviewee 15 stated: "I am just a *Xiaobian*, not a journalist." The negotiation of role definition is dominated by the collaborative relationship with the government. While outsourced journalists view themselves as journalists, government officials persistently perceive them as *Xiaobian*—mere service providers.

Consequently, non-journalistic tasks are assigned to *Xiaobian* due to their placement within government offices. As Interviewee 7 expressed: "They assign additional tasks, such as drafting documents for the office or writing speeches for leaders' meetings. Is this part of our responsibilities?" This ambiguity regarding job scope creates confusion among outsourced journalists. Moreover, some government officials delegate even personal tasks to *Xiaobian*. For instance, Interviewee 10 recounted being asked to "prepare a PowerPoint presentation for a leader's thesis oral defense"—a request she found troubling. Refusing such tasks is challenging because they are service providers who need to fulfill clients' demands despite their deviation from contractual agreements. As Interviewee 10 reflected: "I often wonder why I am being asked to do this when it is not part of my agreed job responsibilities."

Due to their long-term assignments within government offices, *Xiaobian* who provide one-to-one service face dual marginalization. They are marginalized within their news organizations while simultaneously struggling to integrate into government units, resulting in contested positions. Interviewee 9 described this situation:

> We are contracted by the news organization but work within government units. The government staff do not treat us as insiders, making it difficult for us to integrate. Meanwhile, we rarely return to the press, so we are not familiar with our colleagues there either. We are outsiders for both.

However, for news organizations, embedding staff in government agencies serves as a lucrative strategy. As Interviewee 5 explained:

> The key point of embedding someone in the government department is to build close relations with clients to secure more revenue for the press. Apart from managing social media, various projects need to be outsourced, such as producing videos and organizing events, which are more profitable due to their short-term nature.

Similarly, one-to-many services prioritize cost-efficient profit generation. According to Interviewee 8, revenue from managing outsourced government social media accounts constitutes nearly 25% of the newspaper's annual income.

In short, outsourced journalists, also known as *Xiaobian*, occupy a contested in-between position. Their identity negotiation is constrained by dual pressures from both the government and news organizations leaving limited room for professional autonomy in their daily practices.

5.2.2. Practices: Prioritizing Political Safety Versus Communication Effect

As in-betweeners, *Xiaobian* must navigate the tension between stressing political safety and communication effects. The content published on social media represents the voice of the government, so it must be "safe"—meaning it complies with political censorship and avoids causing any negative impact on the government or the Chinese Communist Party. In this context, maintaining the journalistic boundaries is particularly challenging for *Xiaobian*:

> They want a high readership, but the content must also be "glorious, correct, and aligned with the Party's values." At the same time, we can't use memes or humor or just post something casually. I don't have much choice—if I push back and insist that a piece of content is well-written, it might get rejected in the third round of review, and I'll have to start over. (Interviewee 1)

Normally, the content undergoes more than three rounds of review before being published on government social media, ensuring that there are no political risks. The contents are initially reviewed by the senior editors in the news organizations, and subsequently, they are reviewed by government officials. Sometimes, after completing content writing and formatting, *Xiaobian* misses the optimal publishing time while waiting for multiple rounds of review, ultimately leading to low readership. As interviewee 10 explained, "It is common for an article to go through seven or eight people, each with different opinions, leading to repeated revisions. This constant back-and-forth is just part of the routine." Conflicts often arise between newspaper

editors and government officials during the review process. As Interviewee 15 described, these contradictions reflect differing priorities and expectations:

> A senior editor in the press suggests revisions from a professional journalism perspective, such as shortening sentences for clarity. However, when the edited version reaches the government side, they often request changes that restore the original phrasing. Caught between these conflicting demands, I often feel torn—who should I listen to? I try to persuade the government side, but in the end, their decision prevails, and I have no choice but to add back what was previously removed.

In digital communication, concise sentence structures are generally considered more effective for social media dissemination, as they enhance readability and engagement. However, in the context of outsourced government-affiliated media accounts, these professional considerations often yield to bureaucratic requirements. This dynamic reflects the hierarchical relationship between outsourced journalists and government officials, where the latter are perceived as the ultimate decision-makers and compliance with their demands takes precedence over professional judgment. While *Xiaobian* may initially attempt to uphold journalistic standards, repeated experiences of editorial intervention and the lack of agency in decision-making lead to a pragmatic resignation. Rather than insisting on professional best practices, they adapt by prioritizing bureaucratic expectations, effectively internalizing their subordinate role within the institutional framework. Interviewee 9 said: "If change is not possible, adaptation becomes the only option." Moreover, they must reconcile that their work often goes almost unread:

> The article I write may only get a few dozen views, and even those are mostly from colleagues within my department. At first, it takes some getting used to, but after a while, I just stop feeling anything. This world simply needs somebody to function as an NPC [non-player character], generating textual garbage. (Interviewee 1)

This dynamic reflects the broader tension between professional journalistic values and bureaucratic priorities. *Xiaobian* often emphasize factors such as "communication effect" and "the social impact of a topic" (Interviewee 10) in aligning with professional pursuits that value audience engagement and public impact. However, for government officials overseeing media operations, these considerations are secondary. Their primary concern is not whether the content resonates with the public but whether it is successfully published and gains recognition from higher authorities. When government agencies set targets for readership or follower growth, but *Xiaobian* find themselves unable to achieve these goals through content improvements, they often resort to alternative strategies to meet the expectations of their clients. A common and accessible approach is leveraging personal networks for assistance. As Interviewee 6 explained:

> They required the readership to exceed 100, but in my experience, a third of the articles I managed did not reach that threshold. So, I had no choice but to share them with colleagues in my department or family and friends, asking them to help forward articles and boost the view count.

However, when it comes to followers' growth targets, *Xiaobian* often rely on the support of news organizations. Interviewee 8, who managed an outsourced social media account, was given a key performance indicator to increase followers by 30% within one year. Despite his efforts bringing the count close to the goal, he faced a dilemma as the contract neared its end: "With the deadline approaching and no other options left, the

press suggested, 'Let's just buy some followers.' " Similar "data optimization" strategies were also mentioned by Interviewee 11. High readership numbers and follower growth on social media accounts can serve as indicators of impressive performance for leadership, contributing to the positive image of government officials.

5.2.3. Professionalism: Serving the State Versus Serving the Public

According to the Chinese central government (2018), government social media accounts serve three primary functions: propagating the voice of the Chinese Communist Party and the government, encouraging citizen participation in governance, and providing public services. Together, these functions aim to enhance government transparency and foster interaction between citizens and the government. However, in practice, these objectives often translate into a struggle to negotiate the boundary of serving the state (upwards) and serving the public (downwards): "Most of the work done by the government aims to serve the upwards, ensuring that what they do is visible to the higher authorities. The rest is meant to serve the downwards, taking on the demands of the public" (Interviewee 5).

"Serving the upwards" refers to government social media functioning as a platform to showcase the achievements of government officials, enabling them to publicize their completed work. In this way, *Xiaobian* are performing the role of loyal facilitators, contributing to constructing a positive image of political elites (Wang & Li, 2024). "Serving the downwards" involves delivering information relevant to the public. These two functions often coexist. Interviewee 3 explained the reasons behind government social media becoming a channel for officials to highlight their performance:

> If an official successfully introduces a beneficial project, it becomes part of their performance record. They want their superiors to be aware of their accomplishments, but cannot report every detail directly. However, by publishing it on a government social media account, their leaders can easily see what they have done.

Since such propagandist contents, such as the meeting leaders just finished, are written in a formal and bureaucratic style, they tend to be unappealing to the public, ending up with "low readership" (Interviewee 3). However, officials insist on posting them even if they are read only about 20 times (Interviewee 6). In addition, there is limited room for *Xiaobian*, resulting in "highlighting official achievement from the government's perspective rather than from the citizens' perspective" (Interviewee 15). In this way, government social media has become a platform for officials to showcase their political achievements. As Interviewee 5 described, it serves as "the mouthpiece of the leadership, following their directives without question." Consequently, the genres and styles of content published on these platforms are heavily influenced by the personal preferences of government leaders. For instance, some leaders adopt a more conservative approach, prioritizing "serious content" (Interviewee 5), while others emphasize the effectiveness of publicity, encouraging *Xiaobian* to be innovative and engage more closely with the public. "It all depends on the attitudes and styles of the leaders," Interviewee 8 said.

Besides promoting the performance of the leadership, *Xiaobian* at the same time emphasize their role as disseminators and educators, contributing to informing and educating the public. Interviewee 8, who manages government WeChat subscription accounts affiliated with cultural departments, highlighted the educational role of government social media:

> The social media accounts I manage for museums or art galleries primarily focus on cultural public education. For example, we aim to craft eye-catching headlines to attract readers' attention, encouraging them to learn about upcoming exhibitions. The primary goal is to inform the public and subtly inspire them to visit the museum. Our content is more citizen-oriented, often promoting public events and educational activities, functioning as a role in public education. (Interviewee 8)

In this sense, *Xiaobian* prioritizes audience engagement by employing various tactics within their articles to encourage citizen interaction. For example, they use strategies such as "leave a comment at the end of the post for a chance to win a prize" and "we will select 20 readers' comments to receive free tickets to the performance" (Interviewee 2).

Another challenge outsourced journalists face is balancing their dual role of serving government affairs and engaging with the public. Their common strategy is selective effort allocation—deciding how much energy to invest based on the nature of the content rather than viewing the two roles as inherently conflicting. Some *Xiaobian* believe that these functions can coexist and consider both to be integral parts of their work: "Since I know readers aren't interested in content about internal meetings, I don't put much effort or thought into creating those types of articles. Instead, I focus more on content that has educational or public interest value" (Interviewee 8).

In the Chinese context, state-aligned media often operate under the dual pressures of political loyalty and public service. Government-affiliated social media editors, therefore, strategically allocate their efforts to maintain their professional identity while ensuring compliance with state directives. Through selective effort allocation, outsourced journalists minimize the impact of political propaganda on their professional identity while still fulfilling their role as educators and informing the public. At the same time, they legitimize the existence of outsourced government social media by adding social value to their work.

5.3. Precarious Position: Stable Present and Uncertain Future

Operating between government and news organizations, the work of *Xiaobian* is characterized by a state of stagnation, shaped by two key factors: the repetitive nature of content production and the absence of career advancement opportunities. As Interviewee 1 described: "Both my job position and daily tasks are fixed, with little change. Every day feels repetitive, and major events this year are just a rehash of last year's. There's no hope for career progression" (Interviewee 1).

This stagnation is largely a consequence of their marginal position between government agencies and media organizations. Lacking formal integration into either institution, they remain contract workers with limited career prospects:

> There's no path for promotion because we are outsiders to both sides. The government only sees us as temporary service providers. At the same time, we have no advancement opportunities within the media organization either, since we are not truly part of its internal operations. (Interviewee 5)

Moreover, the standardized and formulaic nature of content production reduces the need for specialized professional skills, making social media editors highly replaceable. Their job security is contingent on client

satisfaction rather than institutional stability. As Interviewee 3 noted: "The government contracts the project, not the individual. If they're dissatisfied, they can always contact the news organization and request a replacement."

Beyond the challenges of their current roles, *Xiaobian* also face uncertainty about the future. Over the past decade, the government's social media has transitioned from a phase of rapid expansion to one of steady consolidation. In 2018, the central government issued a directive emphasizing the "healthy development" of government-affiliated social media which included shutting down redundant or inactive "zombie accounts" that were not regularly updated. Since April 2024, more than 10 provincial governments have issued announcements to shut down unnecessary government social media accounts or merge them, triggering a second wave of downsizing in government-affiliated social media platforms. This policy, combined with government budget constraints, has further exacerbated job insecurity. As Interviewee 8 observed: "Recently, many government clients have claimed that their publicity budgets have been reduced, leaving them with no funds to renew outsourced contracts. They may have to take over social media operations themselves" (Interviewee 8).

Interviewee 9 similarly highlighted this trend, stressing the "budget cut of the government." The interplay between a relatively stable present and an uncertain future constrains their ability to navigate the tensions between political compliance and effective communication. The precarious nature of their employment leaves them with little room to assert editorial agency, reinforcing their position as peripheral actors within government communication and media ecosystems. Additionally, the evolving governance of state-affiliated social media in China underscores the shifting priorities of digital authoritarianism where visibility and political loyalty often take precedence over journalistic logic. As budget constraints and policy shifts continue to reshape the landscape of government social media, the role of outsourced journalists remains both structurally marginalized and susceptible to state-driven transformations.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on interviews with 15 journalistic staff assigned by a local press group to manage outsourced government social media, this study examines how journalists engage with government social media operations. We found that in the collaboration of outsourced government social media, journalists act as service providers, assisting the government in building a positive image on social media. These partnerships alleviate financial pressures for news organizations while amplifying the government's voice on social media. Operating within this hybrid space, journalistic staff, known as *Xiaobian*, face ongoing tensions between prioritizing political safety and social influence as well as between serving the state and serving the public. Their precarious employment further constrains their capacity to navigate these tensions and pursue professional autonomy. These dynamics are embedded in a semi-authoritarian governance system, where bureaucratic logic overrides professional logic in the operation of government media.

This study makes several contributions to the existing scholarship. First, it addresses an underexplored aspect of government communication—the role of journalists as contributors to outsourced government social media. While prior research has focused on the interactions between governments and citizens (Bonsón et al., 2016; Criado & Villodre, 2021; Gao & Lee, 2017), this study offers insights into the operational mechanisms behind government communication. Furthermore, contrary to the perspective that

social media adoption symbolizes modernity and transparency (Bonsón et al., 2016; Janowski, 2015), we found that government social media primarily serves to showcase official performance in a bureaucratic society characterized by hierarchical decision-making and administrative logic (Lieberthal & Lampton, 2024), echoing previous research arguing that many governments' use of social media is for symbolic and presentational purposes (DePaula et al., 2018). Under such circumstances, government social media management prioritizes political control and institutional objectives over professional media practices. When bureaucratic logic overrides professional logic, government social media tends to function primarily as a propaganda tool often resulting in low communication effectiveness—typically reflected in the low readership of published content. From this perspective, the professional autonomy of *Xiaobian* is significantly constrained, differing from the journalists who run social media accounts affiliated with the media organizations (Long & Shao, 2021). Nevertheless, some *Xiaobian* attempt to persuade government officials to adhere to professional standards, although the success of such efforts largely depends on the leadership style. It also explains why *Xiaobian* somehow derive a sense of professional identity from their work, viewing their roles as contributing to public service through government communication.

Second, this study advances the understanding of the evolving relationship between journalistic roles and government relations by focusing on journalists who operate as in-betweeners—positioned at the intersection of media organizations and government institutions. Building on scholarship addressing role conflict and shifting professional boundaries, which emphasize the negotiation of journalistic identity and practice (Fisher, 2016; Weder et al., 2023), we find that *Xiaobian* must actively manage role tensions inherent in government-affiliated social media communication. Unlike journalists who employ preventative strategies to distinguish their professional identity from PR work (Fröhlich et al., 2013; Viererbl & Koch, 2021), *Xiaobian* assume dual responsibilities encompassing both state propaganda and public information dissemination. Functioning simultaneously as facilitators and educators, they adopt flexible strategies, such as selective effort allocation, to reconcile competing demands. Operating under dominant bureaucratic logic, they reaffirm their professional identity by redefining their roles through the lens of public service, thereby attributing broader social value to their work. This aligns with a previous study arguing that journalists often perform a hybrid function, balancing normative ideals of press freedom and pragmatic constraints imposed by state and corporate actors (Hanitzsch & Vos, 2017).

Finally, this study expands the theory of boundary work. While existing research primarily emphasizes how journalists maintain boundaries within media organizations (Carlson, 2015; Liu & Berkowitz, 2020), this study shifts the focus to outsourced actors who operate beyond traditional media institutions and navigate the reconstruction of journalistic boundaries. Our findings suggest that the dominance of governmental logic over journalistic logic has significantly reshaped these boundaries. Managing government social media accounts can no longer be considered traditional journalism. In practice, *Xiaobian* are engaged in shaping the government's public image and facilitating its self-presentation (DePaula et al., 2018), crossing the boundaries between journalism and PR (Weder et al., 2023). These boundary-crossing practices represent strategic adaptations to the economic and political pressures faced by media organizations in the digital age, reflecting a broader trend in China's media ecosystem, where outlets are progressively extending their professional domains to accommodate evolving institutional demands.

7. Limitations and Future Work

Admittedly, this study has several limitations. First, it is based on a small sample of interviews which may restrict the generalizability of the findings. Future research could address this limitation by incorporating larger and more diverse samples. In addition, the study focuses on outsourced government social media in a developed city. Given China's five-tier administrative system, social media accounts at the central and provincial levels often have access to dedicated management teams. Future studies could conduct large-scale surveys to offer broader insights into the mechanisms and dynamics of outsourced government social media across different administrative levels and regions. Second, beyond legacy media, some small technology companies also undertake the operation of government social media accounts. These companies often face more complex challenges, such as competing with traditional media organizations, building trust with government clients, and producing more innovative content. These dynamics merit further investigation. Finally, the operation of government social media represents a broader transformation within Chinese media. Media organizations are experimenting with various strategies, particularly those that blur traditional journalistic boundaries to survive in the digital age. Future research could pay closer attention to these peripheral practices of journalism which are becoming increasingly important to media organizations' revenue models.

Acknowledgments

The authors thank the academic editors and the three anonymous reviewers for their helpful comments. We are also grateful to all interviewees who generously shared their insights and experiences—without them, this article would not have been possible.

Funding

This study is supported by the University of Macau's research grant MYRG-GRG2023–00171-FSS.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Data Availability

The participants of this study did not give written consent for their data to be shared publicly, so due to the sensitive nature of the research, supporting data is not available.

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10352
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10352

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Fostering Youth Trust in the European Commission: Communication on Social Media as a Key Strategy

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Submitted: 17 March 2025 **Accepted:** 11 June 2025 **Published:** 17 July 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

For the long-term viability of the EU's democratic system, it is crucial to develop communication strategies aimed at enhancing young citizens' trust in its institutions, with social media playing a key role. This study is structured around two general objectives: (1) to examine youth political trust in the European Commission and its connection to various potential micro- and macro-determinants, and (2) to explore the categories of social media communication that young citizens perceive as potentially contributing to increasing political trust in the institution. Using a quantitative approach, data are collected from $N = 470$ individuals (aged 18 to 26) from Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland. Statistical analyses included binary logistic regression models, ordinal regressions, Kruskal-Wallis tests, and Dunn's post-hoc tests. Results indicate that socioeconomic status, employment status, and education are positively related to trust in the institution, while perceptions of the possibility of citizen participation and economic performance also exhibit a positive association. Among social media communication categories, input-seeking and dialogue-based approaches show the greatest perceived potential, both among young citizens who distrust the Commission and those who trust it. These findings provide valuable insights for designing social media communication strategies aimed at strengthening political trust in the institution, from the perspective of audience targeting and content strategy.

Keywords

communication; democracy; European Commission; European Union; political trust; social media; youth

1. Introduction

The EU is facing a crisis of political and institutional trust, exacerbated since the Euro-crisis of 2009 (Dotti Sani & Magistro, 2016; Foster & Frieden, 2017). This phenomenon poses a challenge for the supranational

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body's institutions, as citizen distrust undermines their legitimacy, reduces the effectiveness of the adopted public policies, and weakens civic engagement (Hetherington, 1998; Zmerli, 2024).

Within this crisis of trust, young Europeans play a crucial role. Their attitudes toward the political class and democratic political institutions directly influence their current and future civic engagement and political understanding. This, in turn, affects the viability and sustainability of democratic systems in the long term (Levine, 2007). In this regard, Foa and Mounk (2016, 2017) suggest that the decline in political support and institutional trust, especially among younger populations, contributes to the "deconsolidation" of democracy.

Given the significance of the issue, the first general objective (GO1) of this article is to examine youth political trust in the European Commission and its connection to various potential micro- and macro-determinants. The study focuses on residents aged 18 to 26 from the five most populous countries in the EU: Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland. The analysis explores variations based on four sociodemographic variables as micro-determinants. These are socioeconomic status, employment status, education level, and country of residence. It also takes into account two macro-determinants, which refer to perception of institutional performance and perception of the quality of democratic processes.

However, this research seeks to go a step further and contribute to the development of strategies to increase political trust. In recent years, a line of research has emerged highlighting how communication from political institutions is a fundamental factor in the building or reinforcement of their political trust (Drakos et al., 2019; Garland, 2021), particularly through social media (Dong & Ji, 2018; Echeverría & Mani, 2020; Jamal et al., 2023; Porumbescu, 2016).

With this in mind, the second general objective (GO2) of this article is to explore the categories of communication on social media that young Europeans perceive as potentially contributing to increasing political trust in the European Commission, under the assumption that such communications are conducted by the institution itself. To this end, the same population as in GO1 is considered appropriate. To establish differences based on the content, the classification proposed by DePaula et al. (2018) is used. The authors distinguish between communication on social media from political institutions oriented towards: information provision, input seeking, online dialogue, offline interaction, and symbolic presentation.

The main contribution of this study is based on the collection of valuable information for designing communication strategies aimed at increasing political trust between young Europeans and the Commission, thereby contributing to the development of a more robust and representative European democratic system. Both the characterization of political trust among young citizens in the European Commission, including its relationship with relevant determinants, and the analysis of the categories of social media communication that they perceive as having the greatest potential to enhance political trust in the institution, provide valuable insights for developing such strategies. When evaluated together, these insights can inform the creation of well-targeted communication strategies in terms of audience and content.

The main distinguishing element of this research lies in its approach: collective from the perspective of the respondents, but individual from the viewpoint of the institution whose political trust is being evaluated. While studies generally measure the trust of a geographically defined population (e.g., a specific country or region) toward various institutions, this article, based on the multidimensional conception of political trust, aims to

do precisely the opposite: to analyze political trust in a specific political institution, taking into account the perspectives of five different countries. Another distinguishing aspect stems from the availability of original data, which allows for the establishment of different lines of analysis.

2. Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is structured in two parts: the first reviews literature on political trust in Europe, focusing on determinants relevant to GO1; the second explores how communication from political institutions on social media influences political trust, and defines the categories analyzed in GO2.

2.1. Political Trust and Its Determinants in the European Context

In its broadest sense, political trust refers to citizens' positive evaluations of political institutions and representatives, grounded in attributes such as competence, credibility, fairness, and transparency. It reflects confidence that these entities or actors will adhere to ethical standards and uphold democratic principles, even amidst uncertainty (Citrin & Stoker, 2018; Zmerli, 2024). As a midrange indicator, it bridges the relationship between political actors and democratic values (Zmerli, 2024), ensuring the legitimacy of institutions (Bauer & Freitag, 2017; Hetherington, 1998).

The importance of political trust is often understood through its impact on the stability and effectiveness of democratic systems, as it facilitates citizens' acceptance of institutional authority and their perception of these political institutions as legitimate (Hooghe et al., 2015; Mishler & Rose, 2005). This "legitimizing character" is a fundamental element as it influences various key areas. Examples include electoral participation (Devine, 2024), economic growth (Sumanjeet, 2015), the use of e-government services (Khan et al., 2020), and the implementation of adopted policies (Zmerli, 2024).

In relation to its determinants, after reviewing the existing literature, the most accepted way to evaluate them is by differentiating between their micro and macro nature.

2.1.1. Background on Micro-Determinants of Political Trust in the European Context

The group of micro-determinants is composed of sociodemographic variables. For this study, the longitudinal research by Schoon and Cheng (2011) is used as a reference. The potential micro-determinants defined as relevant to GO1 are: socioeconomic status, employment status, and education, along with the country of residence. The variables corresponding to gender and age are included solely as control variables, following the same procedure as Kołczyńska (2021).

One of the key studies on the impact of sociodemographic variables on political trust in European institutions is the research by Drakos et al. (2019), who analyze 240,000 observations from 28 countries. Their findings show a positive link between favorable socioeconomic conditions and trust in EU institutions, consistent with the results reported by Schoon and Cheng (2011). Similarly, individuals with stable employment tend to have more trust in these institutions, while those with precarious employment or unemployment tend to have a more negative outlook (Drakos et al., 2019; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Schoon & Cheng, 2011). Regarding variations based on education, Kołczyńska (2020) indicates a positive relationship, particularly in the more established

democracies of Europe. Drakos et al. (2019) and Schoon et al. (2010) also find a connection between these variables, adding that the relationship becomes stronger once education is completed. Expanding on this idea, Hakhverdian and Mayne (2012) suggest that education is negatively related to institutional trust in corrupt European societies, an idea later reinforced by van der Meer and Hakhverdian (2017).

Complementarily, according to Stals et al. (2024), who conducted a comparative study across 15 countries, young Europeans from Germany and Nordic countries have the highest levels of political trust in European institutions. In contrast, countries located in the southern part of the continent show the lowest levels of political trust. The findings of Motti-Stefanidi and Cicognani (2018) support the thesis that southern European countries exhibit the lowest levels of political trust in supranational institutions.

2.1.2. Background on Macro-Determinants of Political Trust in the European Context

Regarding the macro-determinants, two main interrelated factors are relevant to GO1: institutional performance and the quality of democratic processes, both measured through individual perceptions.

The first of the analyzed macro-determinants is institutional performance. Citizens base their trust on the degree of alignment between actions taken by the political institution and their expectations (Berg & Hjerm, 2010). Research exploring the relationship between political trust and institutional performance in the European context adopts two distinct approaches: objective relational analyses with macroeconomic indicators or analyses based on individuals' subjective evaluations. In studies that adopt the objective approach, the findings are divergent. Some authors find a positive relationship between variables (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Kołczyńska, 2021; Taylor, 2000), while others do not identify significant relationships (e.g., Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Oskarsson, 2010; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017). In contrast, in studies that analyze the relationship based on subjective evaluations, such as this article, there is a certain consensus that the political trust of European citizens correlates positively with their subjective economic performance evaluations of the political institution whose trust is being measured (e.g., Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011).

On the other hand, the quality of democratic processes, including transparency, absence of corruption, and possibility of citizen participation, also represents a macro-determinant, improving the sense of participation and civic responsibility (Kaasa & Andriani, 2022; van Elsas et al., 2020). In this case, there is alignment between research that explores the topic through objective parameters and that which does so based on subjective perceptions. Dahlberg and Holmberg (2014) note that European citizens show higher levels of trust in contexts of high democratic quality and integrity. Fundamentally, the explanation of this macro-determinant lies in the negative relationship between political trust and corruption, which is present in numerous studies (e.g., Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Kołczyńska, 2021; Oskarsson, 2010; Torcal & Christmann, 2021). In this sense, the findings of Breitenstein (2019) and Muñoz et al. (2016) are interesting, as they argue that ideological alignment with the members of the political entity being evaluated helps mitigate the loss of trust due to low quality in democratic processes.

Based on the analysis of the micro- and macro-determinants and in relation to GO1, the first hypothesis of the study is formulated:

H1: Political trust of young Europeans in the European Commission is significantly influenced by four sociodemographic variables (socioeconomic status, employment status, education, and country of residence) as well as by their perceptions of institutional performance and the quality of democratic processes.

2.2. Social Media Communication by Political Institutions as a Tool to Increase Political Trust

Regardless of the influence exerted by different determinants on political trust, it is evident that it represents a significant issue in the European political landscape (Dotti Sani & Magistro, 2016; Foster & Frieden, 2017). Research on potential ways to address the political trust crisis (e.g., Hooghe & Marien, 2013; Verhaegen et al., 2017) has taken numerous perspectives: the construction of European identity, the promotion of civic education, the development of citizen participation actions, etc. However, in recent years, the role of communication by political institutions, especially on social media, has gained importance in that sense (Garland, 2021; Porumbescu, 2016).

These communications refer to the strategic use of digital platforms by governments, political parties, and public institutions to disseminate information, engage with citizens, and promote transparency (Bertot et al., 2012; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). They are characterized by their adaptability to the immediacy and interactivity of social media, which demands a shift from traditional one-way communication models to more dynamic, bidirectional interactions (Campos Domínguez, 2024; Ruiz Soto, 2022). For institutional communication on social media to be effective, it relies on six traits: it must be transparent and accessible (Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Mergel, 2013; Porumbescu, 2016); it should encourage bidirectional interaction (Dong & Ji, 2018; Mergel, 2013); it needs to be timely and responsive (Ruiz Soto, 2022); it requires strategic competence, ensuring integrity and professionalism; it should incorporate multimedia content (Alonso-López et al., 2024); and it must align with broader governance goals (Campos Domínguez, 2024).

From a general perspective, the importance of these communications lies in their ability to bridge the gap between political institutions and citizens (Foster & Frieden, 2017). Research shows that effective social media communication improves perceptions of institutional performance and democratic quality (Murni et al., 2024) and positively correlates with transparency and trust (Arshad & Khurram, 2020; Poluan et al., 2022). Moreover, the use of social media by political actors has been found to encourage offline political participation among young citizens (Dong & Ji, 2018). Recognizing this potential, the EU increasingly leverages social media to engage citizens and strengthen European identity (Karantzeni & Gouscos, 2013).

One of the implications of institutional communication's importance is its relationship with political trust, which underpins the GO2 framework. Political trust is undeniably linked to the two macro-determinants presented, as it depends, along with other factors such as media exposure (Marcinkowski & Starke, 2018), on citizens' perceptions of institutional performance and on the quality of democratic processes, both of which are shaped by the communicative effectiveness of actions and policies (Murni et al., 2024).

Recent research consistently highlights the pivotal role of social media communication in strengthening institutional trust. By making actions more accessible and transparent, social media increases citizen satisfaction and perceptions of institutional reliability (Bonsón et al., 2012; Porumbescu, 2016), particularly when it facilitates bidirectional, responsive interactions that encourage civic engagement (Dong & Ji, 2018).

This interactive dimension becomes even more crucial during crises, when transparent and empathetic communication helps maintain public trust (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021). Furthermore, studies indicate that online dialogues between political institutions and citizens bridge the gap between them and reinforce accountability, as demonstrated by Campos Domínguez (2024). In this regard, timeliness is essential (Poluan et al., 2022; Ruiz Soto, 2022). Beyond accessibility and transparency, digital interactions also play a role in addressing broader issues of inequality. Palmisiano and Sacchi (2024) argue that they can reduce perceived institutional distance, mitigating the negative effects of socioeconomic disparities on trust. Weinberg (2024) highlights that authenticity further reinforces this effect. Taken together, these findings underscore social media's transformative potential in political communication, transparency, and the legitimacy of democratic institutions, ultimately fostering greater political trust.

2.2.1. Categories of Social Media Communication by Political Institutions

Considering the research approach proposed in GO2, it is necessary to establish a categorization of political institutions' social media communications. The classification used is the one proposed by DePaula et al. (2018). Specifically, the five categories of communication are utilized (see Table 1).

Table 1. Categories and types of social media communication by political institutions.

Category	Type	Description
		(Communication on social media oriented towards…)
Information provision	Public service announcements	Providing recommendations for safety, public health, and well-being
	Operations and events	Sharing content related to operations of the political institution, programs, and/or policy
	Social sharing	Providing content related to the mission of the political institution
Input seeking	Citizen information	Asking for feedback on a topic, participation in surveys or polls, or seeking input to solve a problem
	Fundraising	Asking for donations and contributions to a cause
Online dialogue	Online dialogue	Responding to online comments or other types of online direct interaction
Offline interaction	Offline discussion	Promoting events that discuss policy issues or inviting the community to meet institutional officials
	Offline collaboration	Inviting individuals to become involved in activities or volunteer
Symbolic presentation	Favorable presentation	Reporting positive activities done by the political institution
	Political positioning	Taking stances on political issues
	Symbolic act	Expressing congratulations, gratitude, or condolences
	Marketing	Elaborating on the features of items or services

Source: Adapted from DePaula et al. (2018).

The first category, information provision, is among the most common in institutional political communication on social media (Agostino, 2013). It focuses on the transmission of information about operations, events, and public service announcements (DePaula et al., 2018). It is closely linked to the democratic goals of transparency and openness (Harrison et al., 2012; Mergel, 2013). However, not all acts of public communication can be

considered transparent, which underlines the importance of accurate, relevant, and useful information (Canel & Sanders, 2012; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021).

Input seeking constitutes the second category (DePaula et al., 2018). In this semi/asymmetric strategy, institutions interact partially with citizens to obtain information that can improve their services (Waters & Williams, 2011). Weinberg (2024) suggests that these forms of interactive democracy, when authentically implemented, can strengthen political trust, as citizens feel that their opinions are valued and taken into account. However, their effectiveness depends on the ability of institutions to use feedback in a meaningful way (Karantzeni & Gouscos, 2013).

Another category of communication, although very rarely used (DePaula et al., 2018), is online dialogue: direct interactions between political institutions and citizens through comments, responses, or conversations in social media. From a public relations perspective, it is considered the most beneficial for political organizations (Grunig & Grunig, 1992). It allows citizens to establish a two-way dialogue, which, if authentic, will improve transparency, trust, and citizen engagement (Bonsón et al., 2012; Dong & Ji, 2018; Weinberg, 2024).

Communication oriented towards offline interaction, offering a more personal and tangible connection between institutions and citizens, also contributes to building trust (Bovaird, 2007; Weinberg, 2024). This category includes communications that invite citizens to participate in events, meetings, or collaborative activities. DePaula et al. (2018) distinguish between offline discussion and offline collaboration.

Finally, symbolic presentation refers to communications that seek to create a favorable image of the political institution. DePaula et al. (2018) base this category on Goffman's (1959) theory, the presentation of self in everyday life, where organizations (and individuals) seek to manage the impression they give to others, playing an important role in relationship building and public image management (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012). However, Fairbanks et al. (2007) warn that these communications can be seen as manipulative if they are perceived as excessively self-promotional (Garnett, 1997).

Taking into account the above, the second hypothesis of the study is formulated, which is related to GO2:

> H2: Among the categories of social media communication by the European Commission, young Europeans perceive input seeking, online dialogue, and offline interaction as having the greatest potential to increase political trust, due to their emphasis on transparency, responsiveness, and interactive engagement.

3. Methodology

To achieve the proposed objectives, a quantitative methodological approach is used. The scope of GO1 is descriptive-correlational and the scope of GO2 is exploratory.

3.1. Data Collection Techniques and Tools

The data collection technique used was a survey, implemented through an anonymous questionnaire. It was administered online between December 2024 and January 2025. To facilitate understanding of the questions, versions of the questionnaire were created in five languages: German, French, Italian, Spanish, and Polish. The translations were done by certified translators. As the data were collected at a specific point in time, the design is cross-sectional.

3.1.1. Population and Sample

The population of the study consists of individuals aged 18 to 26 residing in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, and Poland: approximately 32 million people. The selection of the five countries is based on population data; they are the five most populous countries in the EU and the only ones with populations exceeding 30 million inhabitants.

Since it is impossible to survey all individuals in the population, it is necessary to define a statistically representative sample size. With a confidence level of 95% and a margin of error of 5%, $n = 385$ is calculated as the minimum representative sample size. To respect the proportions of each country's population, a required minimum number of participants per country is determined, which must be reached in order for the sample to be considered valid: Germany $n = 119$, France $n = 96$, Italy $n = 86$, Spain $n = 68$, and Poland $n = 55$. The sampling method used is random; therefore, beyond the established minimum per country, no additional quotas or proportional constraints were applied. The recruitment process is carried out through an international first-party data platform specialized in scientific research.

The final sample comprises $N = 470$ subjects: 202 women (42.979%), 263 men (55.957%), and 5 (1.064%) others. In terms of age, there is a relatively balanced distribution across the nine age groups covered in the study. A total of 123 reside in Germany (26.170%), 116 in France (24.681%), 86 in Italy (18.298%), 85 in Spain (18.085%), and 60 in Poland (12.766%). Regarding socioeconomic status, 31 indicate lower (6.596%), 128 lower-middle (27.233%), 210 middle (44.681%), 87 middle-upper (18.511%), and 14 upper (2.979%). Regarding employment status, 89 are unemployed (18.936%), 192 are students (40.851%), 145 are employed (30.851%), and 44 are both students and employed (9.362%). Finally, in terms of education, 74 have primary education (15.745%), 281 have secondary education (59.787%), and 115 have tertiary education (24.468%).

3.1.2. Variables Measured

The questionnaire begins with two screening questions to confirm that respondents are between 18 and 26 years old and that they reside in Germany, France, Italy, Spain, or Poland. If either of these criteria is not met, the survey does not proceed, and the response is not counted. If the respondent meets both criteria, they continue to complete the questionnaire. The variables evaluated in it are divided into four blocks (see Table 2).

Table 2. Operationalization of the variables measured in the questionnaire.

Block I: Sociodemographic variables (potential micro-determinants in GO1)	
Variables (general information)	Operationalization
Gender	Categorical: woman/man/other
Age	Numerical: 18/19/20/21/22/23/24/25/26
Country of residence	Categorical: Germany/France/Italy/Spain/Poland
Socioeconomic status	Categorical: lower/lower-middle/middle/middle-upper/upper
Employment status	Categorical: unemployed/student/employed/student and employed
Education	Categorical: primary/secondary/tertiary
Block II. Variables related to the perceptions of institutional performance and the quality of democratic processes of the European Commission (potential macro-determinants in GO1)	
Variables (perceptions)	Operationalization
Institutional efficiency	Numerical (scale): 0 (*not efficient at all*)–10 (*completely efficient*)
Economic performance	Numerical (scale): 0 (*completely deficient*)–10 (*optimal*)
Transparency	Numerical (scale): 0 (*not transparent at all*)–10 (*completely transparent*)
Absence of corruption	Numerical (scale): 0 (*completely corrupt*)–10 (*not corrupt at all*)
Possibility of citizen participation	Numerical (scale): 0 (*no possibilities*)–10 (*optimal possibilities*)
Block III: Variable related to political trust in the European Commission	
Variable (perception)	Operationalization
Political trust	Numerical (scale): 0 (*no trust at all*)–10 (*full trust*)
Block IV: Variables related to the perception of the potential contribution of the European Commission's social media communication to the increase of political trust in the institution (GO2)	
Variables (perceptions)	Operationalization
Information provision	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)
Input seeking	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)
Online dialogue	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)
Offline interaction	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)
Symbolic presentation	Numerical (scale): 0 (*zero contribution*)–10 (*full contribution*)

3.2. Data Analysis Techniques and Tools

All variables in the questionnaire are either numerical or can be numerically coded. Consequently, the technique used for data analysis was statistical analysis. The implementation of this technique involves a series of statistical tools: descriptive statistics, binary logistic regression (BLR) models, analyses of B regression coefficients, ordinal regressions, Kruskal-Wallis tests, and Dunn's post-hoc tests with Bonferroni correction. Data analysis procedures were carried out using standard spreadsheet applications, statistical package for the social sciences, and R.

3.2.1. Variables Analyzed

The variables analyzed were self-evident and explicitly derived from individual responses to each questionnaire question. Regarding the coding of variables for analysis procedures, coding equivalent to that

used during operationalization was generally applied. However, in certain statistical procedures, modifications were made. These transformations are specified in the following section and in the corresponding parts of the results.

3.2.2. Data Analysis Procedure

The data analysis procedure is divided into two sections: the first corresponding to GO1 and the second to GO2.

The first section begins with a general descriptive overview of the respondents' political trust values in the institution. Subsequently, to initiate the analysis of the influence of the determinants, two BLR models were conducted: one for micro-determinants and another for macro-determinants.

In both models, the dependent variable is political trust in the European Commission, coded as binary by assigning zero to values below five and one to values equal to or above five. The threshold is set at five based on the median of the responses, following a median-based determination process. Also, in practical terms, the value of five on the 0/10 scale typically represents a neutral or minimal threshold of trust, distinguishing respondents who express some degree of trust in the institution from those who do not. This aligns with prior survey research conventions, where values above this point are interpreted as indicating positive trust. Thus, the threshold is justified both by the statistical distribution of responses and by substantively relevant divisions in social perceptions regarding institutional trust, which further enhances its applied relevance. In the micro-determinants model, the independent variables are the sociodemographic variables from Block I, while the macro-determinants model uses the five variables from Block II. To ensure multicollinearity between variables is not an issue, the variance inflation factor was calculated for numerical variables and the generalized variance inflation factor for categorical variables.

These two models offer an initial examination of the determinants' influence, identifying which variables hold explanatory potential concerning political trust in the institution. However, further tests are required to evaluate the direction and strength of these influences.

Firstly, the B regression coefficients are analyzed independently in both models. They indicate the direction and magnitude of each relevant explanatory variable's effect on the binary dependent variable. The interpretation of these coefficients was performed in the final step of each model, in relation to the reference categories/values for each relevant variable. The reference categories/values are always the last in the operationalization. For example, for the variable country of residence, the reference category is Poland.

In a complementary manner, two ordinal regressions were conducted with political trust (coded on the 0/10 scale) as the dependent variable and the relevant variables identified in each BLR model as independent variables. This enables the assessment of the relationship between variables, overcoming the limitations of simplifying the dependent variable into a binary form. The analysis takes into account the estimates and *p*-values from both regressions.

The second section begins with an overall descriptive summary of the perceived potential of each category of communication on the Commission's social media to increase its political trust. Then, in order to independently

analyze the responses of young citizens who do not trust the institution (value <5) and those who do (value ≥5), the responses to the variables in Block IV are grouped separately. Considering the absence of normality in the distributions, a Kruskal-Wallis test is performed on each set of responses. This approach enables the identification of statistically significant differences in the perceived potential of the different social media communications through intra- and inter-group examinations.

To determine which categories of communication show differences and whether these differences reflect a more favorable or unfavorable perception of potential compared to others, a post hoc test was conducted. The Dunn test with Bonferroni correction was applied. To facilitate the presentation of the results, each communication category was assigned an ID (x1, x2, x3, x4, and x5).

4. Results

In accordance with the data analysis procedure, the presentation of the results is divided into two parts, each corresponding to a distinct general objective.

4.1. GO1

The average value of political trust in the European Commission among respondents is 5.506 on the 0/10 scale (median = 5). A total of 312 respondents (66.383%) assign a trust value of 5 or higher, with the most frequent responses being 5 (n = 77; 16.383%) and 7 (n = 64; 13.617%).

4.1.1. Micro-Determinants of Youth Political Trust in the European Commission

The first step in analyzing the micro-determinants is a BLR model. The dependent variable is political trust, binary coded (distrust/trust), and the independent variables are the six sociodemographic variables (Block I).

After running the model, three variables are identified as relevant: socioeconomic status, employment status, and education. Neither country of residency, gender, nor age is found to be relevant. The omnibus test of model coefficients shows a $p < 0.050$ for the three relevant variables, thus validating their inclusion. Three additional model fit tests are performed: Cox and Snell's R-squared, Nagelkerke's R-squared, and the Hosmer-Lemeshow goodness-of-fit test. In all three cases, the obtained values confirm the validity of the model. The variance inflation factor and generalized variance inflation factor statistics are clearly below the commonly accepted threshold, so multicollinearity between variables is not an issue. The classification table shows a correct prediction in 74.255% of cases (see Table 3).

To determine the direction and intensity of the effect of the three relevant variables, the B regression coefficients are analyzed. Regarding socioeconomic status, the results are: B (lower) = −21.551, B (lower-middle) = −20.305, B (middle) = −19.877, and B (middle-upper) = −19.723. For employment status: B (unemployed) = −1.451, B (student) = −0.905, and B (employed) = −0.512. For education: B (primary) = −1.106 and B (secondary) = −0.318.

Table 3. Classification table of the BLR model (micro-determinants).

Step	Variables (independent)	Observed		Predicted		
				distrust/trust (dependent)		% Correct
				0 (distrust)	1 (trust)	
Step 1	Socioeconomic status	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	23	135	14.557
			1 (trust)	8	304	97.436
		General percentage				69.574
Step 2	Socioeconomic status	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	48	110	30.380
	Employment status		1 (trust)	15	297	95.192
		General percentage				73.404
Step 3	Socioeconomic status	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	59	99	37.342
	Employment status		1 (trust)	22	290	92.949
	Education	General percentage				74.255

To further explore the relationship between variables, an ordinal regression was conducted, where the dependent variable, political trust in the European Commission, maintains its original coding (0/10 scale). In this case, the obtained estimates are more representative. For the variable socioeconomic status, the results are: est (lower) = −2.504 ($p < 0.001$), est (lower-middle) = −1.832 ($p < 0.001$), est (middle) = −1.271 ($p = 0.011$), and est (middle-upper) = −0.921 ($p = 0.072$). For employment status: est (unemployed) = −0.984 ($p = 0.003$), est (student) = −0.366 ($p = 0.217$), and est (employed) = −0.198 ($p = 0.521$). For education: est (primary) = −1.339 ($p < 0.001$) and est (secondary) = −0.284 ($p = 0.166$).

Therefore, considering both analyses, in which all values (*B*/est) are below zero, it is determined that the reference categories exhibit the highest levels of political trust. Additionally, analyzing the progression, it is found that higher socioeconomic status and education are associated with a greater probability of trusting the institution. For employment status, the categories involving labor activity present the highest values. The relationship is positive across all three variables. This can be visualized graphically in Figure 1.

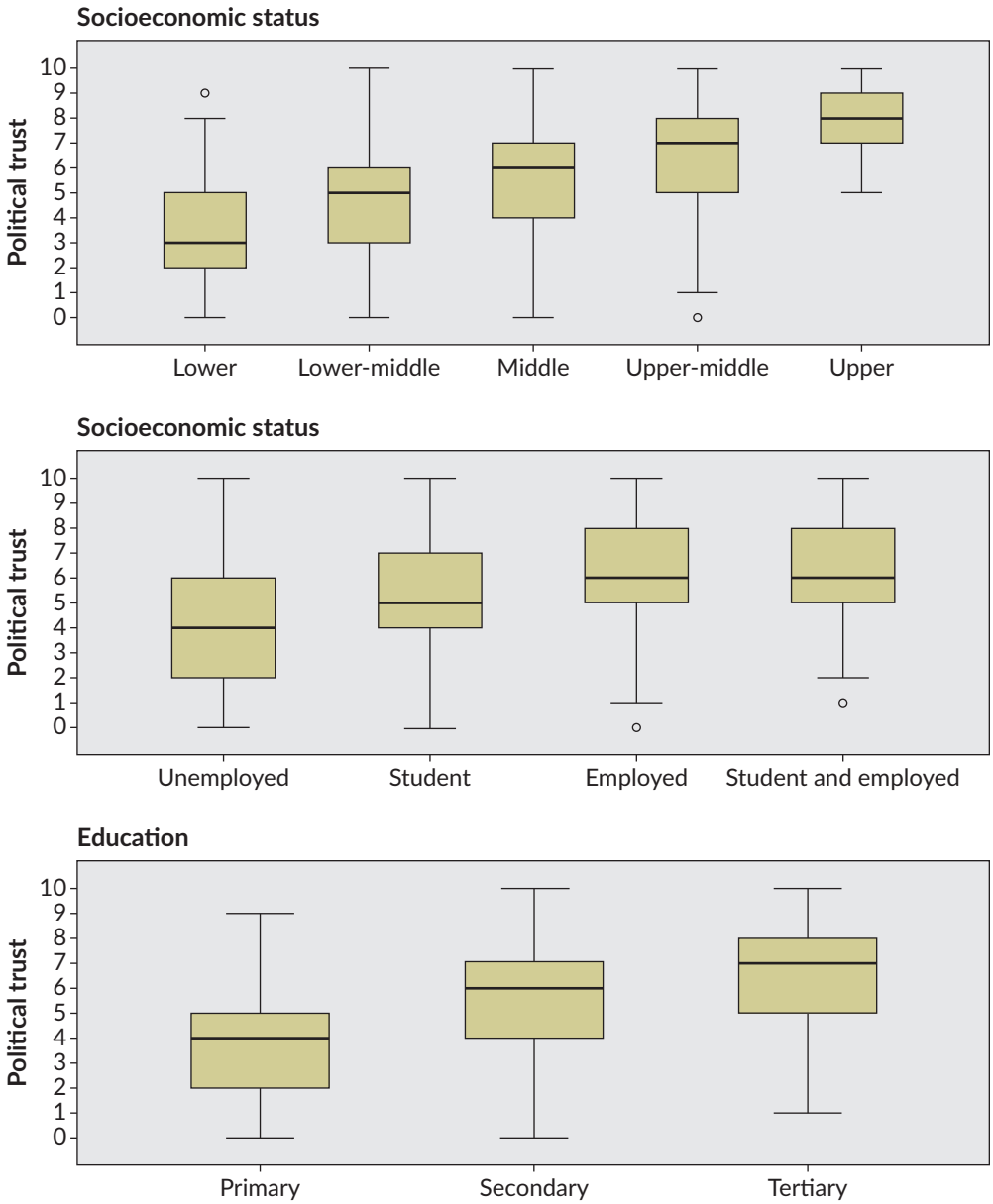


Figure 1. Box-plots on the relevant micro-determinants.

4.1.2. Macro-Determinants of Youth Political Trust in the European Commission

In this case, the independent variables in the BLR model are the five corresponding to perceptions of institutional performance and the quality of democratic processes of the European Commission (Block II).

Only two variables are considered relevant: the perception of the possibility of citizen participation and the perception of economic performance (omnibus tests $p < 0.001$). The perceptions of institutional efficiency, transparency, and the absence of corruption are not relevant. The three reliability tests conducted confirm the validity of the model. Multicollinearity does not pose a problem in this model either. The general percentage of correct predictions in the final step of the classification table is 83.617% (see Table 4).

Table 4. Classification table of the BLR model (macro-determinants).

Step	Variables (independent)	Observed		Predicted		
				distrust/trust (dependent)		% Correct
				0 (distrust)	1 (trust)	
S1	Possibility of citizen participation (perception)	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	87	71	55.063
			1 (trust)	17	295	94.551
		General percentage				81.277
S2	Possibility of citizen participation Economic performance (perceptions)	distrust/trust (dependent)	0 (distrust)	111	47	70.253
			1 (trust)	30	282	90.385
		General percentage				83.617

The *B* regression coefficients reflect a positive relationship between the binary dependent variable (distrust/trust) and both explanatory and relevant independent variables. The relationship, for both variables, is almost uninterrupted across all 10 values in relation to the reference value. In the final step, for the variable concerning the perception of the possibility of citizen participation, the coefficients range from $B\ (0) = -20.773$ to $B\ (9) = -0.040$. For the variable related to the perception of economic performance, the range is from $B\ (0) = -39.248$ to $B\ (9) = -18.033$.

The ordinal regression indeed shows an uninterrupted progression across the 10 values. Regarding the first variable, the estimates are: est (0) = −6.450 ($p < 0.001$), est (1) = −4.788 ($p < 0.001$), est (2) = −5.573 ($p < 0.001$),...est (7) = −1.439 ($p = 0.002$), est (8) = −0.620 ($p = 0.187$), and est (9) = −0.543 ($p = 0.288$). Concerning the second variable: est (0) = −4.271 ($p < 0.001$), est (1) = −3.963 ($p < 0.001$), est (2) = −3.875 ($p < 0.001$),...est (7) = −1.176 ($p = 0.030$), est (8) = −1.099 ($p = 0.051$), and est (9) = −0.538 ($p = 0.317$). Consequently, the positive relationships are confirmed. This can be visualized graphically in Figure 2.

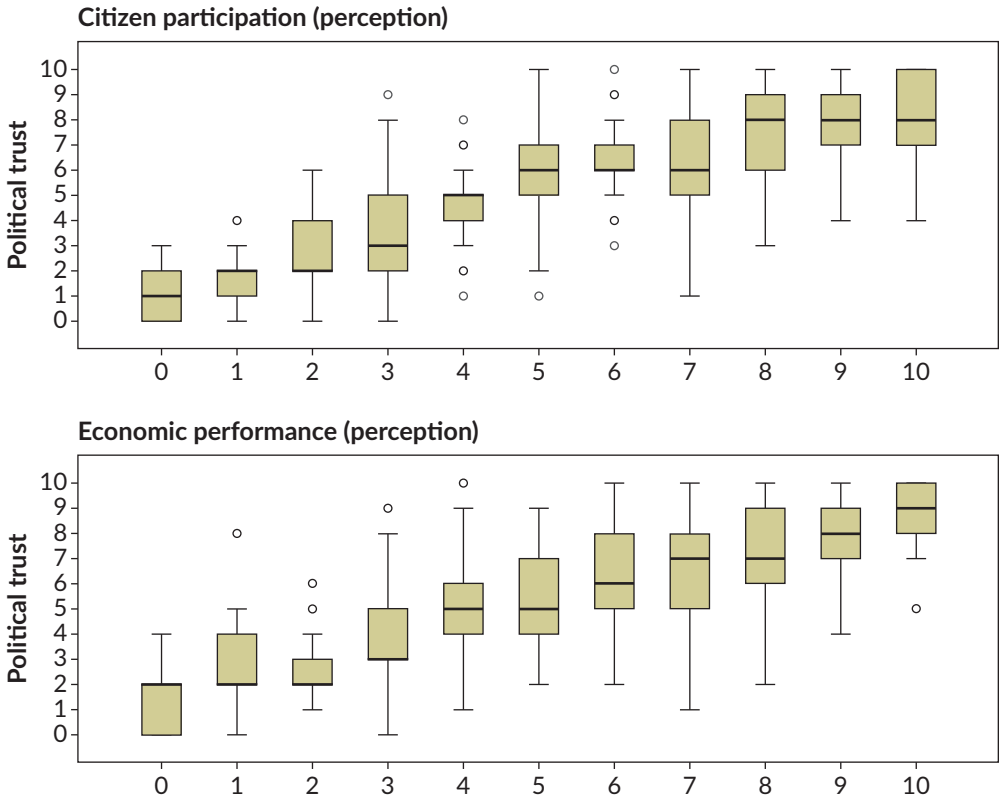


Figure 2. Box-plots on the relevant macro-determinants.

4.2. GO2

The overall distribution of values on the perceived potential of the five categories of social media communication by the European Commission to increase political trust in the institution is summarized in Table 5. The category with the highest general perceived potential is input seeking (average = 6.636; median = 7), while the one with the lowest is symbolic presentation (average = 2.706; median = 2).

Table 5. Summary of the perceived potential to increase political trust in the European Commission for each category of social media communication by the institution.

Category	Information provision	Input seeking	Online dialogue	Offline interaction	Symbolic presentation
	ID: x1	ID: x2	ID: x3	ID: x4	ID: x5
Average (scale 0/10)	4.212	6.636	5.674	5.751	2.706
Median (scale 0/10)	4	7	6	6	2
Normality (*p*-value)	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001	<0.001
Skewness	0.399	−0.579	−0.109	−0.056	1.138
Excess kurtosis	−0.729	−0.165	−0.094	0.034	1.214

Two lines of analysis are established, separating the responses of young citizens who do not trust the institution (n = 158; 33.617%) from those who do (n = 312; 66.383%). In both cases, the distributions of the responses are not normal ($p < 0.050$). Taking into account this lack of normality, two Kruskal-Wallis tests are conducted

to assess differences in perceived potential across communication categories, one for each response group. In both tests, the null hypothesis of equal distributions across categories is rejected ($p < 0.001$). The H statistics ($H = 232.702$ and $H = 407.111$, respectively) are well above the critical acceptance value (9.487), further reinforcing the rejection of the null hypothesis. Therefore, there are statistically significant differences in the perceived potential of the various categories of social media communication. The effect sizes are $\eta^2 = 0.294$ and $\eta^2 = 0.261$, indicating that the differences are substantial.

In order to determine the sources of statistically significant differences between categories, two post-hoc Dunn tests with Bonferroni correction were carried out, one for each Kruskal-Wallis test. The corrected α value is 0.005 ($alpha/m = 0.050/10$).

For young Europeans who do not trust the Commission, the following pairs of social media communication categories show statistically significant differences in perceived potential to increase political trust in the institution: x1–x2, x1–x3, x1–x4, x1–x5, x2–x5, x3–x5, and x4–x5. For those who do trust the institution, the significantly different pairs are: x1–x2, x1–x3, x1–x4, x1–x5, x2–x3, x2–x4, x2–x5, x3–x5, and x4–x5. Table 6 presents the statistics for all possible pairwise comparisons between the five communication categories in both Dunn's post-hoc tests.

Table 6. Mean (rank) differences in all pairwise comparisons between the five communication categories in both Dunn's post-hoc tests.

Pair	Mean (rank) difference	*Z*	*SE*	Critical value	*p*-value
Responses from young citizens who do not trust the European Commission					
x1–x2	−237.686	9.305	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x1–x3	−192.177	7.524	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x1–x4	−196.155	7.679	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x1–x5	72.553	2.840	25.541	71.695	0.004
x2–x3	45.509	1.781	25.541	71.695	0.074
x2–x4	41.531	1.626	25.541	71.695	0.103
x2–x5	310.240	12.146	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x3–x4	−3.977	0.155	25.541	71.695	0.876
x3–x5	264.731	10.364	25.541	71.695	<0.001
x4–x5	268.708	10.520	25.541	71.695	<0.001

Table 6. (Cont.) Mean (rank) differences in all pairwise comparisons between the five communication categories in both Dunn's post-hoc tests.

Pair	Mean (rank) difference	*Z*	*SE*	Critical value	*p*-value
Responses from young citizens who trust the European Commission					
x1–x2	−376.227	10.494	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x1–x3	−184.125	5.135	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x1–x4	−196.786	5.488	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x1–x5	299.054	8.341	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x2–x3	192.102	5.358	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x2–x4	179.440	5.005	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x2–x5	675.282	18.835	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x3–x4	−12.661	0.353	35.851	100.637	0.724
x3–x5	483.179	13.477	35.851	100.637	<0.001
x4–x5	495.841	13.830	35.851	100.637	<0.001

As derived from the analyses of differences, perceptions of the potential of social media communication categories to increase political trust in the European Commission do not vary significantly depending on whether young citizens trust the supranational institution or not. Clearly, the communication category with the highest perceived potential is input seeking, followed by offline interaction and online dialogue. Communication oriented towards symbolic presentation show the lowest values.

5. Discussion

On the political trust of young Europeans in the European Commission, this research reflects a scenario where, although a considerable number of respondents trust the institution, the majority show some skepticism, and a significant proportion exhibit strongly negative and polarized levels of political trust. From this perspective, the results are partially in line with those of Stals et al. (2024) and Kołczyńska (2021). The most likely causes are the disconnect between European youth and politics, as well as ideological polarization, both of which have been widely studied in the scientific literature (e.g., Harring, 2024; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015).

The micro-determinants identified as relevant are socioeconomic status, employment status, and education, all showing a positive relationship with political trust in the institution. Overall, the results align with existing research, which also links better socioeconomic conditions (Drakos et al., 2019; Schoon & Cheng, 2011), favorable employment status (Drakos et al., 2019; Foster & Frieden, 2017; Schoon & Cheng, 2011), and higher education levels (Hooghe et al., 2012; Kołczyńska, 2020) with higher levels of political trust in European institutions. This is logical, as individuals with financial stability, secure employment, and higher education are more likely to engage with political processes. In contrast, those facing economic or job insecurity tend to view these institutions as less effective in addressing their needs, leading to higher levels of distrust (Wroe, 2016).

Despite these alignments, in terms of regional differences, the results diverge from certain studies (Motti-Stefanidi & Cicognani, 2018; Stals et al., 2024) that report higher political trust in central and

northern European regions. No statistically significant regional differences are found across the five countries analyzed. This finding may reflect the greater integration of EU institutions and shared political experiences, particularly among younger Europeans. Factors like the collective responses to major crises and the influence of digital platforms could have led to a more unified perception of political trust, reducing regional variations, partially in line with Serna-Ortega et al. (2025). Similarly, no differences are observed based on gender or age.

On the other hand, among the macro-determinants associated with the quality of democratic processes, a positive link is found with perceptions of the possibility of citizen participation. This relationship is supported by existing research. For instance, Ardanaz et al. (2023) find that greater citizen participation correlates with higher political trust, emphasizing the importance of raising awareness about participation initiatives. Hooghe and Marien (2013), in that line, associate political trust with institutionalized participation. At the local level, Holum (2023) finds no such connection, suggesting that the relationship may vary depending on the institutional geographical context. Within this first group of macro-determinants, neither perceived transparency nor the perceived absence of corruption, both frequently linked to political trust (e.g., Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Kołczyńska, 2021; Oskarsson, 2010; Torcal & Christmann, 2021), emerge as significant factors. This may once again be attributed to young citizens' passive disengagement from politics, a phenomenon that remains a topic of ongoing debate (Dahl et al., 2020). Their limited engagement often stems from a perception that political issues are abstract or lack personal relevance, causing immediate or personal political experiences to carry more weight than broader institutional perceptions in shaping their trust.

With respect to macro-determinants related to institutional performance, the perception of the European Commission's economic performance is also positively linked to its political trust among European youth. This is consistent with several studies (e.g., Hetherington & Rudolph, 2008; van der Meer & Dekker, 2011) that examine the issue through subjective perceptions. These findings reinforce the existing consensus when evaluating the topic via perceptions, which does not hold when explored from an objective perspective using macroeconomic indicators (e.g., Anderson, 2009; Hakhverdian & Mayne, 2012; Kołczyńska, 2021; Oskarsson, 2010; Taylor, 2000; van der Meer & Hakhverdian, 2017).

Concerning the categories of social media communication that young Europeans perceive as having the greatest potential to increase political trust in the Commission, the results reveal notable differences between bidirectional and unidirectional communication. Communication oriented toward input seeking, online dialogue, and offline interaction received the highest ratings. These findings align with previous research that highlights the importance of bidirectional interaction in fostering institutional trust (Dong & Ji, 2018; Weinberg, 2024). Young citizens perceive that these categories facilitate active participation, mitigating their political disengagement by making them feel heard and integrated into political-building processes (Dotti Sani & Magistro, 2016; Murni et al., 2024). This kind of dialogue signals that institutions listen to citizens, which is crucial for building legitimacy (Campos Domínguez, 2024; Mergel, 2013).

Conversely, unidirectional communication, such as information provision and symbolic presentation, is perceived as less effective. Their static and hierarchical nature does not meet young Europeans' expectations for direct interaction with institutions. Symbolic presentation can be interpreted as superficial self-promotion, especially if it is perceived as disconnected from concrete actions (DePaula et al., 2018;

Fairbanks et al., 2007). This reinforces the idea that young Europeans reject traditional approaches to political communication, associating them with inauthentic or distant practices (Garnett, 1997; Pilkington & Pollock, 2015).

A relevant finding is that these perceptions do not vary significantly between those who distrust and those who trust the institution. Both groups agree on prioritizing interactive strategies, suggesting that the demand for participation transcends prior levels of trust, further reinforcing the notion that bidirectionality is not only useful for regaining lost trust but also for strengthening it (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Porumbescu, 2016). In this way, the results highlight a paradigm shift in young citizens' expectations: They are no longer passive recipients of information, but active agents demanding shared responsibility in governance (Bovaird, 2007; Weinberg, 2024).

To correctly interpret the findings of the study, it is important to consider its limitations. In data collection, the main limitation is the cross-sectional design, which may cause responses to be influenced by temporal bias or by social and political events occurring at the time of the questionnaire. Moreover, the use of a first-party data platform in the recruitment process may also introduce biases related to online literacy, as participants must have a minimum level of digital competence to register and complete the questionnaire, and biases related to digital access, which may limit participation to individuals with stable internet connections and adequate devices, potentially excluding certain demographic groups. At the same time, for certain sensitive variables, there may be a bias due to respondents' reluctance to accurately disclose their true situation. In the data analysis, the main limitation is the subjectivity of the responses, present in all studies that include perceptual variables. Also, although complementary statistical procedures have been employed to maximize the representativeness of the results, the use of scales or the conversion of variables may present a reductionist view of the phenomenon at certain points of the analysis. Lastly, extrapolating the findings requires caution, as the study focuses solely on young citizens from the EU's five most populous countries and one specific institution.

6. Conclusions

For GO1, it is concluded that the political trust of European youth in the Commission is not optimal. The majority of respondents rate their level of trust at intermediate values, indicating doubts or skepticism about the institution. The micro-determinants with predictive potential are socioeconomic status, employment status, and education, all showing a positive relation. The relevant macro-determinants include the perception of the possibility of citizen participation and the perception of the institution's economic performance, also showing a positive relationship with political trust. Therefore, H1 is partially supported and partially rejected. Statistically significant differences are found in three of the four sociodemographic variables, with country of residence being the only one that does not follow the expected trend. Regarding the two hypothesized macro-determinants, both are found to be related to political trust, although this relationship is confirmed only through two of the five variables included.

For GO2, it is concluded that the category of communication via the European Commission's social media with the highest perceived potential to increase political trust in the institution is input seeking, followed by offline interaction and online dialogue. Consequently, H2 is supported by the findings.

Beyond their contribution to the scientific literature and social debates on the importance of political trust in contemporary democracies, these findings have great potential for application in developing communication strategies aimed at increasing political trust between the European youth and the European Commission. For example, social media campaigns could focus on promoting transparency and engaging in bidirectional communication through live Q&A sessions or interactive polls. However, scaling such initiatives across diverse national contexts may present challenges, including varying levels of digital literacy and cultural differences. These potential barriers must be addressed to ensure the effectiveness and inclusivity of these strategies.

Building on the discussed limitations, future research could adopt a longitudinal approach to examine how perceptions evolve over time, addressing temporal bias and the influence of transient social or political events. Additionally, incorporating qualitative methods would help mitigate the limitations inherent in self-reported data. Expanding the study to include a broader range of geographical contexts and institutions could also provide valuable insights into how these perceptions vary across different political landscapes.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to express their gratitude to the anonymous reviewers and to Maud Reveilhac and Nic DePaula for their insightful and constructive feedback, which has significantly strengthened the quality of the article. They would also like to thank Iván Durán Pérez for his contribution.

Funding

This research is funded by the project Lobby and Communication in the European Union of the Ministry of Science and Innovation (Spain), the State R+D+I Programme for Proofs of Concept of the State Programme for Societal Challenges, the State Programme for Scientific, Technical, and Innovation Research 2020–2023 (PID2020–118584RB-100), by the Ministry of Science, Innovation, and Universities (Spain) FPU/02553, and by the University of Malaga (Spain).

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset generated as a result of the research can be found at https://doi.org/10.7910/DVN/GRMSWZ and will be made available upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10371
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10371

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Open Access Journal

Mapping Government Use of Social Media Influencers for Policy Promotion

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Submitted: 31 March 2025 **Accepted:** 18 August 2025 **Published:** 2 October 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

This study explores how national governments leverage social media through influencer partnerships and digital campaigns to promote cultural values and policy goals. Covering a broad spectrum of governmental bodies (e.g., ministries and officials), the research highlights the variety of influencer–government partnerships and collaborations. The study comes at a time when diverse regulatory frameworks are emerging globally to govern influencers' activity, mandating transparency in sponsorships, protecting consumer interests, and setting boundaries on influencer involvement in governmental and political campaigns. The methodology combines two main steps: (a) a web search of news articles and blogs to identify relevant examples of government–influencer collaborations; (b) a manual annotation of government-led influencer strategies of the retrieved examples based on thematic areas, degree of autonomy in the partnership, and narrative strategy. The study focuses on France, the US, and Canada, chosen for their advanced digital environments and initiative-taking approaches in both social media regulation and public diplomacy. The main contribution of the study is to develop a typology of government–influencer collaborations to align public perception with (inter)national policy goals and reach their target audiences.

Keywords

influencers; engagement; government communication; government–influencer relations; political public relations; social media

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1. Introduction

Governments worldwide are increasingly experimenting with digital communication strategies to shape public perception, promote policy initiatives, and engage with diverse audiences (Mergel, 2016). At the same time, previous studies have shown that influencers are impactful actors for policy promotion (Ding et al., 2023; Powell & Pring, 2024) and that news influencers are highly focused on governmental affairs and elections (Stocking et al., 2024). One significant aspect of this transformation is the strategic use of social media influencers to disseminate government messages (Pawennei et al., 2024), diplomatic actions (Webb, 2022), and build trust with the public (Michel et al., 2024). This study focuses on public-sector social media influencers, referring to content creators who collaborate with government agencies to promote civic or policy-related content, excluding partisan campaigning or opposition attacks. This approach contrasts strongly with traditional political communication that relies on mainstream media and official government statements. The study seeks to systematically map and categorize the types of government collaborations with online content creators to promote cultural values and policy goals. It deliberately excludes influencer engagements whose primary purpose is electoral campaigning, misinformation propagation, or partisan attacks.

In the US, Canada, and France, government-led influencer campaigns have been deployed in areas such as public health (e.g., Covid-19 awareness campaigns), election participation, climate action advocacy, and tourism promotion (e.g., Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2022; Ding et al., 2025). These initiatives reflect a shift in governmental communication from one-way, top-down messaging to more interactive, audience-centric engagement facilitated by influencers who are perceived as trusted, relatable intermediaries. For instance, public agencies contacted influencers to promote and diffuse health information during the Covid-19 pandemic (Pöyry et al., 2022) and, more recently, the US government reached out to TikTok influencers to share its views on the current war in Ukraine in a way that resonates with digital-native audiences (Lorenz, 2022). While empirical evidence is limited on the full scope of these partnerships, such examples point to the type of influencer–government strategic partnership. These examples suggest that influencers are considered strategic partners for governments. In parallel, many European countries (e.g., France, the Netherlands, and Germany) have introduced legislation requiring clear disclosure of paid partnerships, reinforcing ethical guidelines for influencers' participation in government messaging.

The integration of influencers into political and governmental communication raises several concerns. These include ethical considerations (transparency in sponsorships), regulatory challenges (disclosure laws, fair representation), and the potential instrumentalization of influencers for political opportunism (Schaffer, 2025). When collaborating with influencers, governments must navigate an evolving landscape where reach, credibility, and public reception are highly contingent on platform-specific dynamics. This study addresses the following research question: In what ways are governments in the US, Canada, and France structuring collaborations with social media influencers to promote public goals, and how can these forms of engagement be categorized according to the type of influencer, as well as the influencer's degree of autonomy, narrative strategy, and thematic affinity?

To answer this question, the study uses a qualitative mapping approach. It draws on publicly accessible data from 30 documented cases of government–influencer collaborations between 2020 and 2024, including government press releases, news coverage, transparency registers, and influencers' public disclosures. Rather than analyzing the content of influencer posts, this study focuses on the institutional and strategic

dimensions of collaboration (e.g., degree of autonomy, main narrative strategy, and thematic affinity with influencers' expertise or core focus). The goal is to inductively develop a typology of government–influencer relations, offering an initial conceptual framework for understanding this emerging practice. Given its exploratory nature and reliance on secondary sources, this study aims to offer an empirically grounded typology that can inform future research using more systematic or comparative methods, including audience reception studies or interviews with stakeholders.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Blurred Boundaries Between Social Media, Public Sector, and Political Influencers

Social media influencers can be broadly defined as individuals who cultivate a sustained presence on social media platforms and maintain a large, engaged audience, serving as opinion leaders (Harff et al., 2025). Their influence stems from perceived authenticity, relatability, and consistent interaction with followers. They typically operate in commercial contexts, promoting products, lifestyles, or personal brands, though some also engage with political or societal themes.

Public-sector social media influencers, by contrast, refer specifically to social media influencers who enter explicit collaborations with government agencies or public institutions to promote policy-related, civic, or informational content. These collaborations are formalized to varying degrees, ranging from paid partnerships to co-branded campaigns or institutional outreach, and serve state communication goals (Abidin, 2021). Importantly, a public-sector social media influencer may not self-identify as political but become part of state communication efforts due to the nature of the collaboration. This study is primarily concerned with this category, as it reflects a structural partnership between influencer and state.

Political influencers, meanwhile, are typically defined as individuals who regularly engage with political content, take public stances on civic issues, or participate in public debates and political campaigns (Goodwin et al., 2023), regardless of whether they collaborate with governments. They may be journalists, activists, or entertainers with political platforms. However, the boundaries between categories are fluid: Influencers who are not typically political may temporarily become political influencers when participating in a government-led campaign with relevance in public policy. For example, when a celebrity like Olivia Rodrigo appears in a White House video encouraging Covid-19 vaccination, she participates in government communication that is political in nature (but not necessarily as a political influencer) by temporarily assuming the role of a celebrity-partner in a state campaign—a form of strategic symbolic engagement (Van Zoonen, 2005).

In this study, we treat government communication as a form of political communication, in line with scholarship that sees public-sector messaging on policy issues (e.g., health, climate, voting) as inherently political in function and effect. The present study focuses on public-sector social media influencers—regardless of whether they are regular political content creators or not. It does not assume that all influencers involved in civic campaigns are political influencers, but rather that they engage in political communication through institutional public partnerships.

2.2. General Context of Collaborations Between Governments and Influencers

The growing use of influencers in public communication occurs in an environment of limited regulation and evolving professional norms. The lack of clear regulations in the influencer industry makes it difficult to trace political sponsorships, raising ethical questions about accountability and potential manipulation (Hund, 2023; Schmuck et al., 2022). Critics argue that the commodification of politics through influencer marketing risks reducing political engagement to a branding exercise rather than fostering meaningful discourse (Riedl et al., 2023). Furthermore, influencers have at times played a role in spreading misinformation and conspiracy theories, complicating their reliability as political intermediaries (Harff et al., 2022). Additionally, a risk associated with government–influencer collaborations is disinformation campaigns. An illustrative example is the Fazze case, where influencers in France and Germany were secretly offered financial incentives to spread false claims alleging high death rates among recipients of Pfizer's Covid-19 vaccine. Fazze, a Russian-linked marketing firm, orchestrated this campaign, highlighting how influencer platforms could be exploited to propagate misinformation rapidly.

While influencers provide governments with a powerful avenue for reaching and mobilizing the public, their involvement in political discourse remains contested, as it challenges traditional notions of political accountability, authenticity, and democratic engagement (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024). Van Dijck and Alinejad (2020) stress that governments' strategy in collaborating with influencers to promote public messages might not be without risk, notably because influencers can be mandated by multiple interested parties. The authors report on the case of the Dutch government who hired vloggers and popular YouTube influencers to promote the coronavirus measures. However, some influencers turned their backs on health authorities' messages and started to support anti-government groups afterwards, thus sending a double message to the public.

2.3. Desacralization of Politics or Political Opportunism

Traditional media theories, such as two-step flow theory (Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955), suggest that opinion leaders mediate political information between governments and the public. In the framework of the present study, this model suggests that influencers are not passive conduits of information but instead interpret, modify, and reshape governmental messages before they reach audiences. In addition, uses and gratifications theory (Blumler & Katz, 1974) emphasizes the agency of audiences, suggesting that people follow opinion leaders for entertainment, relatability, or expertise. A critical question is whether influencers mandated by governments can be considered political actors or merely tools of government communication (Arnesson, 2022; Dafrizal et al., 2025). Drawing from these fundamental theories, governments' reliance on influencers can be explained by a strategic partnership with influencers who already command trust among target audiences, bypassing traditional skepticism toward official institutions.

One of the key debates surrounding government collaboration with influencers is whether it represents a move toward more informal, engaging, and accessible political discourse or a form of political opportunism that exploits influencers' credibility to push state agendas (Suuronen et al., 2022) or to engage with certain audiences, especially younger people (Peter & Muth, 2023). While democratic communication ideally fosters open, deliberative debate, the state's reliance on influencers—whose typical activity prioritizes entertainment, relatability, and personal branding—raises questions about authenticity, agenda-setting, and

public manipulation. By leveraging influencers, governments can control which issues gain prominence in public discourse. These partnerships can also be seen as a form of political opportunism, where governments strategically outsource political messaging to online personalities who possess high engagement levels and parasocial relationships with their followers (Michel et al., 2024). Whether these government–influencer collaborations are democratizing public communication or reinforcing state-controlled narratives in an informal and highly persuasive format is still open to debate (Kotkaniemi et al., 2024; Woolley, 2022).

2.4. Important Dimensions of Influencer–Government Collaborations

In this study, we pay particular attention to the theoretical dimensions critical to understanding influencer–government collaborations, specifically examining the type of influencer involved, their degree of autonomy, narrative strategies employed, and the thematic focus of their campaigns.

First, the type of influencer significantly influences the scope and effectiveness of government collaborations. For instance, nano- and micro-influencers, characterized by smaller but highly engaged niche audiences, might yield different outcomes compared to macro-influencers or celebrities who typically have broader, but potentially less intimate, connections with their followers. The type of influencer is theoretically relevant as it shapes the perceived authenticity and relatability of the messaging, affecting the overall efficacy of public communication.

Second, influencer autonomy constitutes a critical theoretical dimension, directly linked to public perception of credibility. Influencers who maintain greater autonomy in their collaborations are often seen as trustworthy and authentic sources, distinct from traditional governmental or institutional messaging. Conversely, perceived lack of autonomy, where influencers appear as mere conduits for government propaganda, can undermine the effectiveness and trustworthiness of the campaign (Chou et al., 2023). Thus, theoretical considerations of autonomy should address the balance between influencer independence and governmental control or oversight.

Third, narrative strategies utilized by influencers for the specific campaign significantly impact audience engagement and persuasion. Theoretically, strategies such as humor, emotional appeal, or personalization enhance audience receptivity by creating emotional resonance and relatability (Nisbett & Schartel Dunn, 2021). Feng et al. (2021) underscore the critical role narratives play in mediating the potentially negative effects of explicit sponsorship disclosures by embedding promotional messages within authentic personal experiences and emotional connections.

Finally, the thematic focus of the collaboration aligns theoretically with influencer expertise or established areas of influence. Collaborations where government messages resonate with influencers' established thematic niches (e.g., health, environment, civic engagement) tend to be perceived as more legitimate and credible by their audiences (Goodwin et al., 2023; Vallström & Törnberg, 2025). Therefore, examining the alignment between influencers' core interests and government objectives is crucial for understanding the theoretical underpinnings and practical effectiveness of these collaborations.

3. Data and Method of Analysis

This study seeks to identify the range of government-led influencer campaigns across the US, Canada, and France. The selection of countries is guided by both theoretical relevance and practical considerations. These three democracies represent diverse media ecosystems and regulatory environments, yet they share a common trend of experimenting with influencer collaborations for public communication. The US is notable for its decentralized and innovation-driven approach to digital communication, where individual agencies and even local governments have partnered with influencers, often without overarching regulatory frameworks. France, by contrast, has introduced some of the most stringent transparency regulations in Europe governing influencer marketing, including state-sponsored content, making it a valuable case for exploring institutional oversight. Canada occupies a middle ground, where public institutions have used influencers in coordinated campaigns (particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic) while navigating evolving ethical and governance standards.

To identify the relevant cases, the study draws on a systematic Google search using the queries "government AND influencers AND [country X]," with terms such as "White House" or "administration" also being used as alternative terms to "government." From this first stage, we considered only newspaper and media channel articles, governmental pages, blogs (e.g., university labs, media blogs, specialized communication blogs), or networking platforms (e.g., LinkedIn), which enabled us to identify relevant cases. Then, we relied on a snowball strategy by using a similar search query but adding the names of specific influencers as follows: "government AND influencers AND [country X] AND [influencer X]." This typically returned results with additional examples which we considered for the typology elaboration. The approach carries several notable limitations. Primarily, using Google search restricts the findings to influencer–government collaborations that gained attention outside social media platforms, typically through traditional or specialized media channels. Consequently, campaigns exclusively conducted within social media environments, which constitute the majority, are inherently excluded unless they achieve a level of external notoriety. This means our analysis includes campaigns that attracted external media interest, potentially introducing bias towards well-publicized or high-impact collaborations and limiting the visibility of smaller or exclusively social media-based campaigns. The aim of our data collection is not exhaustive coverage but to capture emblematic and illustrative examples. Thus, while these limitations constrain the generalizability of the findings, they nonetheless enable an insightful exploration of prominent influencer–government collaboration patterns. In total, we analyze 30 cases (8 for Canada, 12 for France, and 10 for the US).

For coding the identified cases along the four dimensions (type of influencer, degree of autonomy, narrative strategies, and thematic expertise), the following detailed categories and coding criteria were established based on the theoretical framework: type of influencer, degree of autonomy, narrative strategies, and thematic expertise.

The type of influencer is categorized based on follower count. The categories are nano-influencer (<10k followers), micro-influencer (10k–50k followers), mid-tier influencer (50k–500k followers), macro-influencer (500k–1M followers), and celebrity influencer (>1M followers).

The degree of autonomy is defined and inferred from the nature of the influencer–government relationship described in articles. The categories are direct sponsorship (financial or material compensation to generate

content or organize campaign events), government collaboration (joint creation of messaging with or without financial transaction), and political engagement (influencers independently promoting political messages aligned with governmental policies or values without explicit or direct collaboration).

Narrative strategies are based on the main communication style of the campaign. The categories are entertainment/humor (e.g., humorous content or entertaining elements, including memes), personal storytelling (e.g., sharing of personal experiences, anecdotes or expertise as central narrative), public discourse (e.g., contribution or engagement with broader societal debates, including call to action), and educational/informative (e.g., campaign structured to educate or inform about a specific topic or issue, including fact-based advocacy).

Thematic expertise indicates whether the influencers have expertise on the topic of the campaign as indicated by their public profiles or regular content themes (coded as yes/no) considering only the primary expertise (e.g., health/lifestyle influencers regularly combine health-specific topics with general lifestyle elements).

4. Results

4.1. Aggregated Results

Table 1 provides a comparative analysis of influencer–government collaborations across Canada, France, and the US, highlighting distinct national patterns in terms of collaboration type, influencer expertise, narrative strategies, and type of influencer.

Table 1. Aggregated counts for the analyzed government–influencer collaborations.

		Canada	France	US	Total
Type of influencer	Celebrity influencer (>1M followers)	0	7	7	14
	Macro-influencer (500k–1M followers)	0	3	1	4
	Micro-influencer (10k–50k followers)	1	0	1	2
	Mid-tier influencer (50k–500k followers)	2	2	1	5
	Nano-influencer (<10k followers)	1	0	0	1
	Varied	4	0	0	4
Type of collaboration with the government	Direct sponsorship	4	5	2	11
	Government collaboration	1	2	7	10
	Political/personal engagement	3	5	1	9
Influencer expertise	No	4	7	7	18
	Yes	4	5	3	12
Main narrative	Educational/informative (fact-based advocacy)	4	5	0	9
	Entertainment/humor (including memes)	0	2	0	2
	Personal storytelling (personal expertise)	4	2	2	8
	Public discourse	0	3	8	11

In terms of collaboration type, Canada appears to rely more heavily on direct sponsorship arrangements and political or personal engagement, with limited cases of formal government co-creation. This suggests a model

in which influencers may be contracted more transactionally or may act autonomously in support of public messaging. France presents a more balanced distribution across the three collaboration types, indicating varied strategies and a more adaptive or case-by-case approach. In contrast, the US shows a strong preference for government collaboration, suggesting structured partnerships and coordinated messaging efforts between the state and influencers.

Regarding influencer expertise, a general trend emerges across all three countries: Most influencers (60%) do not have clear domain-specific expertise. Canada stands out with an even split between influencers with and without relevant expertise, implying a more deliberate match between influencer background and campaign content. France and the US tend to use influencers regardless of specific knowledge, potentially prioritizing popularity or reach over subject-matter alignment.

Narrative strategies also differ. Canada and France rely heavily on educational or informative narratives. The US, in contrast, leans heavily into public discourse, emphasizing broader societal conversations or opinion-shaping rather than didactic messaging. Personal storytelling is used across all three countries, but is slightly more prominent in the US, while entertainment or humor appears only in French cases, reflecting a cultural preference for blending information with levity.

Finally, the type of influencer deployed reveals that France and the US use celebrity influencers with over one million followers, suggesting a focus on broad visibility and mainstream appeal. In Canada, campaigns draw from a varied pool of influencer sizes, including macro- and mid-tier. This indicates a more diversified or experimental strategy that potentially aims for authenticity or targeted reach.

Overall, Canada tends to prioritize informational content and balanced partnerships with mid-level influencers, while France leverages celebrity status with a wide narrative palette. The US emphasizes government collaboration and public discourse through highly visible, though not necessarily expert, personalities. These national patterns reflect different institutional logics, but also audience expectations and communication cultures, in shaping how public authorities engage influencers for strategic communication.

4.2. Specific Examples

This section highlights selected cases from the broader dataset presented in Annex 1 of the Supplementary File. Annex 1 provides a detailed analysis of the identified government–influencer collaborations coded for influencers' type, thematic expertise, degree of autonomy, and narrative strategies. Illustrative examples that underscore key patterns and strategies across contexts are presented hereafter.

Governments across Canada, France, and the US are progressively turning to social media influencers as strategic communicators, marking a shift from traditional media towards platforms and voices that resonate more directly with younger and digitally engaged demographics. As the Canadian news outlet CTV reported, "In 2021 the Canadian government turned to social media influencers to promote federal initiatives on multiple occasions, from the Covid-19 vaccine rollout to Winterlude 'staycations,' spending more than $600,000 in the process" (Aiello, 2022). In France, this shift was encapsulated by coverage from Les Echos, noting, "Le gouvernement parie sur les influenceurs pour séduire la jeunesse" (in English, government bets on influencers to attract young people; Clinkemaillié, 2021), emphasizing the state's efforts to engage youth

through digital content creators. Similarly, in the US, the White House acknowledged this evolving media landscape, with President Biden referring to influencers as "the new source of news," as reported by City News in 2024. This is particularly evident in campaigns related to public health (e.g., Covid-19 vaccination), mental health, climate action, and digital policy advocacy.

The collaborations operate along a spectrum of autonomy. At one end, direct sponsorship represents state-led communication with clear financial compensation and messaging guidelines. This model was prevalent in Covid-19 campaigns (e.g., Health Canada's contracts with influencers like iamsukhmangill and Kairyn Potts), with one creator posting a picture of himself posing in a shirt promoting the Covid-19 vaccine after the start of the contract with Health Canada. In France, similar arrangements were used to promote the Universal National Service. At the other end, collaborations rooted in political or personal engagement allow influencers to retain greater autonomy while still promoting government-aligned narratives. Such engagements, like EnjoyPhoenix's meeting with French spokesperson Gabriel Attal, stated that the goal was to share her concerns about the management of the crisis. Government collaborations (e.g., structured co-productions without overt sponsorship) represent an intermediary model, prominently used in the US during briefings or in Canada's broader federal outreach strategies, including cybersecurity awareness month.

Narrative strategies employed by influencers are equally diverse. First, entertainment/humor influencers are mobilized for health awareness and youth-focused civic engagement campaigns. In France, this was exemplified by McFly & Carlito's collaboration with President Macron, where a viral "anecdote competition" reached over 10 million views. A second major narrative is educational/informative (fact-based advocacy), particularly effective in complex and technical areas. Canada's Canadian Centre for Cyber Security engaged tech influencers, while France's Hugo Lisoir and Micode communicated on space governance and AI policy, respectively. As in Hugo Décrypte's interview with Macron, where the head of state was questioned about the future of young people in France, addressing themes such as mental health, the environment, inequality and education. Furthermore, tech and science influencers (e.g., Micode, Hugo Lisoir) are brought in to facilitate fact-based advocacy in policy areas like artificial intelligence, space strategy, and cybersecurity. A third personal storytelling strategy emphasizes emotional resonance and relatability. Gurdeep Pandher's joyful Bhangra dance promoting vaccination in Canada was widely referenced. Likewise, Gaspard Guermonprez addressed student struggles during the pandemic: "He had published a video a few days earlier on the distress of students due to the health crisis" (Clinkemaillié, 2021). Louise Aubery's work on gender equality illustrates how influencers use lived experience to humanize complex issues. Meme-based activism and entertainment-infused content are also visible, particularly in France's collaborations with McFly & Carlito. Finally, public discourse strategy emerges as a dominant narrative in the US and France, where influencers often host interviews, moderate discussions, or raise political issues directly with government officials. Olivia Rodrigo's engagement reflects this: "She is part of a growing list of creators…who are interested in working with the White House to deliver a pro-vaccine message" (Rogers, 2021). The same strategy was used by Gen-Z for Change in the US to mobilize TikTok users to attend briefings on Ukraine when the Biden administration enlisted Gen-Z for change to help organize a briefing about the war in Ukraine.

5. Discussion of the Main Findings

The typology of influencer–government collaborations illustrates how states strategically leverage digital personalities for public persuasion, engagement, and mobilization. This aligns with Pawennei et al. (2024)'s findings on the increasing strategic role of influencers in government messaging. This phenomenon aligns with the broader trend of the desacralization of politics (Suuronen et al., 2022) where governments move away from formal, institutionalized communication to more informal and relatable digital interactions. While this shift increases accessibility and engagement, it also raises concerns about political opportunism, as discussed by Michel et al. (2024), particularly in cases where influencers function as intermediaries without fostering meaningful deliberation.

The use of entertainment influencers for health campaigns (e.g., McFly & Carlito in France, Olivia Rodrigo in the US) exemplifies how states exploit parasocial relationships to humanize policy messages, an approach critiqued by Kotkaniemi et al. (2024) as potentially repackaging state narratives in more digestible but less critical formats. This raises concerns about whether influencers enhance democratic engagement or simply repackage political messaging in a persuasive format without fostering critical discourse, thus echoing critiques of the commodification of politics through influencer marketing (Riedl et al., 2023).

The findings also reinforce the debate on whether influencers function as political actors or communication tools (Arnesson, 2022; Dafrizal et al., 2025). In practice, they often occupy both roles simultaneously, especially within the context of political communication. The observed degrees of autonomy, direct sponsorship versus organic political engagement, suggest different scenarios where influencers serve as mediators of political information or more passive conduits. Direct sponsorship, observed in cases such as Health Canada's Covid-19 campaign and the French National Service Promotion, implies a top-down, controlled communication strategy where influencers serve as amplifiers of government messages rather than independent voices. This aligns with Arnesson and Reinikainen's (2024) concerns about authenticity and government influence over public discourse. It also raises ethical questions about transparency, as highlighted by Schmuck et al. (2022), especially when influencers do not clearly disclose their financial ties to the state. Conversely, non-sponsored collaborations (e.g., Hugo Décrypte's political interviews, EnjoyPhoenix's engagement on youth policy) highlight cases where influencers maintain relative autonomy, acting as intermediaries between governments and their audiences and blurring the boundary between political participation and communication facilitation. This suggests a more bottom-up model of public engagement, where influencers facilitate policy discussions rather than simply transmitting state-approved messaging. Such examples reflect what Peter and Muth (2023) describe as governments' attempts to connect with younger audiences in more informal spaces, though the boundary between engagement and instrumentalization remains unclear. However, even in such cases, their role as political actors may remain ambiguous: Do they shape discourse independently or are they still entangled in state legitimacy efforts (Michel et al., 2024)?

Country strategies diverge in meaningful ways that reflect broader institutional, cultural, and regulatory environments. Canada tends to balance a mix of influencer types and narratives reflecting the country's emphasis on multicultural inclusion and policy diversity. France often leans on celebrity-driven entertainment content, such as YouTube collaborations with the Élysée, but these efforts show variable levels of transparency, influenced by ongoing national debates about media ethics and centralized state

communication. The US emphasizes influencer briefings and coordination initiatives (e.g., Gen-Z for Change), frequently built around unified talking points. This reflects both the country's politicized media ecosystem and a more campaign-style approach to public communication, raising concerns about centralized narrative control. These national differences not only shape how influencers are selected and framed but also affect how audiences perceive authenticity, transparency, and trust in government communication.

The analyzed cases also highlight ethical concerns regarding transparency, disclosure, and potential government co-optation of influencers' credibility. A key concern is the lack of transparency in paid collaborations, where influencers did not initially disclose their compensation, raising concerns about covert government propaganda. This problem reflects broader regulatory challenges outlined by Hund (2023) and the need for clearer sponsorship disclosure frameworks (Schmuck et al., 2022). The issue extends beyond France, as election-related initiatives, such as the White House's use of TikTok influencers for midterm voter engagement, could be perceived as partisan mobilization rather than neutral democratic outreach. This issue directly engages debates about instrumentalization (Schaffer, 2025; Woolley, 2022).

Furthermore, the debate over the role of influencers in shaping versus relaying political discourse remains unresolved. Cases such as Macron's engagement with influencers during elections highlight the blurred line between democratic engagement and strategic public relations. While some influencers facilitate meaningful dialogue (e.g., Micode's discussion on AI policy), others risk serving as government mouthpieces, particularly when financial incentives or access to political figures are at stake. This ambiguity is consistent with concerns raised by Harff et al. (2022) about the reliability of influencers as political intermediaries and with the broader question of whether such collaborations contribute to democratic discourse or dilute it (Arnesson & Reinikainen, 2024).

6. Limitations and Future Research

The findings underscore how government–influencer collaborations reshape political communication by leveraging digital platforms as new arenas of public engagement. While fact-based advocacy dominates science and policy-driven campaigns (e.g., cybersecurity, climate change, AI governance), mobilization strategies such as call-to-action and meme-based activism are central to youth engagement and election-related efforts. This demonstrates the versatility of influencer-based messaging but also raises concerns about the depth of political engagement fostered through such interactions.

This study has several limitations that should be acknowledged. First, the dataset was compiled through purposive web searches and manual annotation, which, while systematic, may be subject to selection bias and limit reproducibility. Second, the scope was confined to three Global North democracies (France, Canada, and the US), which restricts the generalizability of the findings across political systems and media environments. Third, the study focuses on government-led campaigns and does not incorporate audience-side data, leaving questions of perception, trust, and influence unaddressed. Finally, without longitudinal analysis, it is difficult to assess the long-term impacts of these influencer partnerships on public engagement or political behavior.

Future research should more systematically investigate this tension by assessing not only state intentions but also audience reception and perception over time. Key questions include: Do these collaborations foster

long-term democratic habits? Or do they normalize a persuasive communication culture under the guise of participation? Longitudinal studies examining audience trust, perceived authenticity, and behavioral outcomes could offer stronger answers. Moreover, to enhance generalizability, future studies should adopt a more systematic and scalable approach to data collection—such as increasing the number of cases, incorporating multilingual and cross-platform data, and using computational tools for influencer identification and campaign tracking.

Additionally, regulatory frameworks must evolve to ensure transparency and democratic safeguards in state-affiliated influencer campaigns. This includes developing clearer disclosure standards and accountability mechanisms to mitigate the risks of misinformation and undue political influence (Muñoz, 2023). While this comparative study of France, the US, and Canada offers valuable insight, expanding the geographic and political scope would deepen understanding. Countries such as Germany and Finland, which balance influencer outreach with strict transparency regimes, or Spain and Italy, where influencer strategies intersect with populist dynamics and mediatized politics, offer contrasting models (Starita & Trillò, 2022; Suuronen et al., 2022). Furthermore, studying authoritarian contexts—where influencers are often directly co-opted for propaganda—would clarify how these dynamics operate under constrained civic conditions and inform a more global view of influencer governance.

Finally, future research needs to assess the audience's reception of influencer content as motivated by trust, entertainment, or perceived authenticity. While influencer collaborations present a powerful tool for state communication, they also introduce significant risks regarding autonomy, transparency, and the potential manipulation of public discourse (Ascolese, 2023). The challenge moving forward is ensuring that these digital engagements enhance democratic dialogue rather than simply reformat state narratives in an informal and highly persuasive format.

Acknowledgments

The author developed the research at University of Zurich but her current main affiliation is with the Department of Social Sciences at Lappeenranta-Lahti University of Technology in Finland.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Zurich and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability

The detailed coding of the influencer–government partnerships and collaborations is available upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT (OpenAI, GPT-4) was used solely for English language proofreading. The author reviewed and approved all edits. No generative AI tool was used for data analysis, interpretation of results, or decision-making related to the study's conclusions.

Supplementary Material

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

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10434
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10434

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Open Access Journal

Public Institutions Meet TikTok: Communication Strategies and the Rise of Govtainment

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Submitted: 29 March 2025 **Accepted:** 4 September 2025 **Published:** 16 October 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

This study explores how the communication strategies of public institutions have been redefined by digital platforms, with a particular focus on TikTok. Specifically, it examines the extent to which elements of "govtainment"—the "spectacularisation" of government communication through digital media—are present in the communication strategies of public institutions. We analysed how the communication strategies of two Romanian ministries on TikTok are shaped by the platform's specific characteristics, the impact of these adaptations on their audiences, and what elements of "govtainment" can be identified within their content. We employed a mixed-method approach, combining quantitative and qualitative content analysis of TikTok publications by Romania's Ministry of Defence and Ministry of Internal Affairs—the only two ministries with a consistent presence on the platform. The findings indicate that both ministries adapt their communication strategies to align with TikTok's features, incorporating elements that enhance virality, such as tone, viral trends and sounds, content formats, speech acts, and humanisation. Our analysis confirms the presence of govtainment elements in the communication strategies employed by these ministries. However, when correlating spectacularisation elements such as trend participation, tone, and speech acts with audience engagement, we found that their presence does not necessarily result in the highest engagement rates. Nevertheless, the overall figures suggest that both institutions have managed to gain significant engagement on their TikTok accounts.

Keywords

communication strategies; government communication; govtainment; public communication; spectacularisation; TikTok

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1. Introduction

TikTok is a video-sharing social media application, launched on the international market in 2017 by a Beijing-based tech company, ByteDance (Werner, 2025). After 2020, it became one of the most successful applications ever launched (AppFigures, 2020). With more than 1.59 billion active users worldwide in January 2025 (Kemp, 2025b), TikTok is gaining significant traction also in Romania, with 8.51 million users above 18 years of age, approaching Facebook's figure of 9.9 million (Kemp, 2025a). The application is particularly popular among Millennial and Gen Z users worldwide: Indeed, the majority of content creators on TikTok are, at a global level, between 18 and 24 years old (Ceci, 2025).

Since 2023, TikTok has faced partial bans on institutional and governmental devices in multiple countries. European institutions have prohibited staff from using the Chinese application, citing potential cybersecurity risks (Bertuzzi, 2023). Similarly, the United States and Canada implemented restrictions on TikTok for government-issued mobile devices amid growing concerns regarding data privacy and cybersecurity ("TikTok banned on U.S. government devices," 2023). Despite its controversial status, TikTok has become an important channel for governments to reach younger citizens who are often less engaged with traditional political communication. This study examines how governments use TikTok, contributing to debates on digital governance and strategic communication by showing how public institutions adapt their messaging to new media environments and engage audiences in innovative ways.

In Romania, TikTok enjoys significant popularity, ranking as the third most used social media app there (Kemp, 2025a). However, since December 2024, it has been at the centre of a major controversy following a decision by Romania's Constitutional Court to annul the results of the first round of the presidential election. This ruling was based on allegations that one of the candidates had unfairly benefited from a TikTok campaign allegedly orchestrated by Moscow (Ross et al., 2024).

As we intend to analyse TikTok as a government communication channel, it is first important to understand its popularity. Wang and Guo (2023) and Taylor and Chen (2024) consider that TikTok's success can be explained through its algorithm. Compared with other social media platforms such as Facebook or Instagram where users primarily receive content from their own network, on TikTok one's network and networking are less important, with the focus being instead on the "For You" feed which is personalized by its algorithm (Barta & Andalibi, 2021; Bhandari & Bimo, 2022; Darvin, 2022; Taylor & Chen, 2024). As a platform, TikTok enables users to post short-form videos—originally limited to 15 or 60 seconds and extended to up to 10 minutes in recent updates. According to the platform itself (TikTok, 2025), its mission is "to inspire creativity and bring joy." TikTok videos encompass a wide range of content, including dance, lip-syncing, comedy skits, and educational tutorials. The platform encourages user creativity by employing filters, stickers, voiceovers, sound effects, and background music (Werner, 2025). Its design incorporates features that foster participatory culture through remixability; features such as "duet" and "stitch" allow users to directly interact with and respond to existing content. TikTok's interface design shapes the user experience and contributes to one's addiction to the platform (Cușnir, 2025). Moreover, TikTok promotes trends and viral practices (Abidin, 2020) and encourages imitation and replication (Zulli & Zulli, 2020).

The impact of social media—and TikTok in particular—on political communication has already been investigated by researchers, with an emphasis on "politainment" strategies involving personalisation and

spectacularisation (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023; Battista, 2023; Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023; Cervi et al., 2021, 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). The rise of the "influencer politician" has also been analysed (Cervi, 2023; Pérez-Curiel & Limón-Naharro, 2019; Starita & Trillò, 2021). In contrast, the use of TikTok in government communication has received comparatively less scholarly attention. Social media, in general, has been studied as a tool enabling governments to engage with citizens and involve them in governance processes (Bertot, 2019; Hand & Ching, 2011; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2016; Picazo-Vela et al., 2016), as well as for disseminating information during the Covid-19 pandemic (Basch et al., 2021; Che & Kim, 2024; Cușnir & Nicola, 2023; Li et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). However, there has been limited interest in understanding how TikTok's features and the need for public administrations to engage with younger audiences have shaped government communication. Our research seeks to address this gap by examining how the communication strategies of two Romanian ministries have adapted to TikTok—and what impact they have achieved, in trying to emphasise the "govtainment" dimension of their respective strategies.

2. Literature Review

According to Nieland (2008), "politainment" refers to the blending of politics and entertainment into a new type of political communication and may be seen as resulting from an increasing mediatisation and professionalisation of politics that characterise modern democracies. Although initially the concept referred to the ways governments, political parties, and politicians adapted to the media logic, especially television, later the concept was extended to cover the impact of digital media on political communication. Berrocal-Gonzalo et al. (2023, p. 163) define politainment as "the phenomenon in which political information is trivialised by the hybrid narratives in which it is included and its anecdotal tone, with the aim of reaching an audience that seeks entertainment rather than information" and is used especially in the digital sphere to expand one's audience.

Until now, researchers have been interested in how political parties and leaders communicate on TikTok and the impact this has, especially on the personalisation of communication and the use of TikTok features. Cervi et al. (2023) examined the use of TikTok in the last presidential elections in Peru as a unilateral tool for promotion, while Zamora-Medina et al. (2023) discussed TikTok's contribution to a political personalisation approach. These analysis show the uneven use of TikTok in political communication. The idea of the non-adaptation of political communication to TikTok is emphasised by the comparative study carried out by Zamora-Medina et al. (2023), who find that political actors are not exploiting the full potential of TikTok's features and continue broadcasting their messages largely using traditional communication practices. González-Aguilar et al. (2023) examined how right-wing populist parties and politicians use TikTok, also from a politainment approach, emphasising the spectacularisation of communication. In this case, humourists and entertaining videos reached higher engagement and contributed to the popularity of populist right-of-centre issues. The effectiveness of using TikTok is also emphasised by Zamora-Medina (2023) when analysing politainment strategies, "pop-politics," and visual storytelling on the accounts of Spanish political parties.

In the framework of politainment, recent studies have emphasised the adoption of influencer marketing techniques in political communication and the rise of the "influencer-politician" (Cervi, 2023). These actors blend political messages with influencer-style marketing strategies such as personal branding, performative aesthetics, and the content styles of internet celebrities, particularly on TikTok. Cervi (2023), Pérez-Curiel and Limón-Naharro (2019), and Starita and Trillò (2021) analysed the techniques of "celebrity politicians" on

social media in different national contexts. Other studies explored how TikTok's features used for political communication blur the boundaries between campaigning and entertainment (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023; Battista, 2023; Cervi et al., 2021) or how content visibility can be amplified through the platform's algorithm (Bandy & Diakopoulos, 2020).

Government communication strategies help uphold institutional legitimacy and citizen trust, given that there is constant pressure for public organisations to operate in transparency (Graber, 2002) and to ensure democratic accountability (Canel & Sanders, 2011). Government communication has, admittedly, some specific limitations when compared to private organisations: Namely, it operates under constraints such as public records law and confidentiality requirements (Liu & Horsley, 2007), and is shaped by bureaucratic planning schedules and hierarchical decision-making, with its main goal being to inform and serve the public good.

As the popularity of social media has changed the way public institutions communicate with their public, governments have incorporated social media into their communication strategies to engage with citizens and stakeholders (Cmeciu & Cmeciu, 2014; Graham, 2014; Mergel, 2012, 2013). Since its emergence, social media has been perceived as a tool to encourage citizen engagement and to involve them in decisions concerning governance (Hand & Ching, 2011; Haro-de-Rosario et al., 2016), to disseminate policies (Picazo-Vela et al., 2016), inform the public, and, in general, promote government transparency (Bertot, 2019). Studies show that while these platforms offer dialogic potential, many governments underutilise them for conducting genuine two-way communication, focusing instead on traditional broadcast methods (Sáez Martín et al., 2015; Wukich & Mergel, 2015).

For all the interest in the way TikTok has reshaped political parties and their leaders' communication, there is much less research on government communication on TikTok and the impact on the way such official bodies produce content. Existing research has primarily explored TikTok's role in government communication strategies during the Covid-19 pandemic (e.g., Basch et al., 2021; Che & Kim, 2024; Li et al., 2021; Zhang et al., 2024). Morejón-Llamas et al. (2024) highlighted that, after the pandemic, public institutions increasingly adopted TikTok to engage younger audiences through dynamic and flexible communication formats. Alonso-López et al. (2024, p. 34) emphasised that TikTok has acquired great relevance among young people, a development which has led institutions, political parties, and brands to maintain an active presence on the platform as it is one of young people main sources of information. This study also showed, however, that Spain's government ministries maintain a low publication frequency on TikTok, and there is a lack of common strategy "to maximize performance on this social network" (Alonso-López et al., 2024, p. 34). In addition, despite being adapted to the technical specificities of the platform (effects, brevity, language, etc.), the content published by these ministries is not concerned with generating participation or engagement (Alonso-López et al., 2024, p. 44).

Yang's (2022) analysis of seven Chinese governmental TikTok accounts found that their performance was quite different from each other and suggested some general principles to improve it. Moreover, Ratnastuti et al. (2023, p. 112) revealed how the Indonesian Ministry of Finance adapts to the TikTok style "so that the delivery of formal public information becomes lighter and more interesting."

While substantial research has examined how TikTok has reshaped political communication, there is a noticeable lack of scholarly attention on how government institutions have adapted their communication

practices to the platform's unique features. Even less is known about how audiences perceive and engage with this type of public sector content. This dual gap—in both institutional production and audience reception studies—underscores the need to explore how TikTok is transforming public communication strategies. Figure 1 presents a visual representation of the transformation of government communication through the features available on TikTok, as analysed through the lens of politainment and influencer-politician concepts from the sphere of political communication.

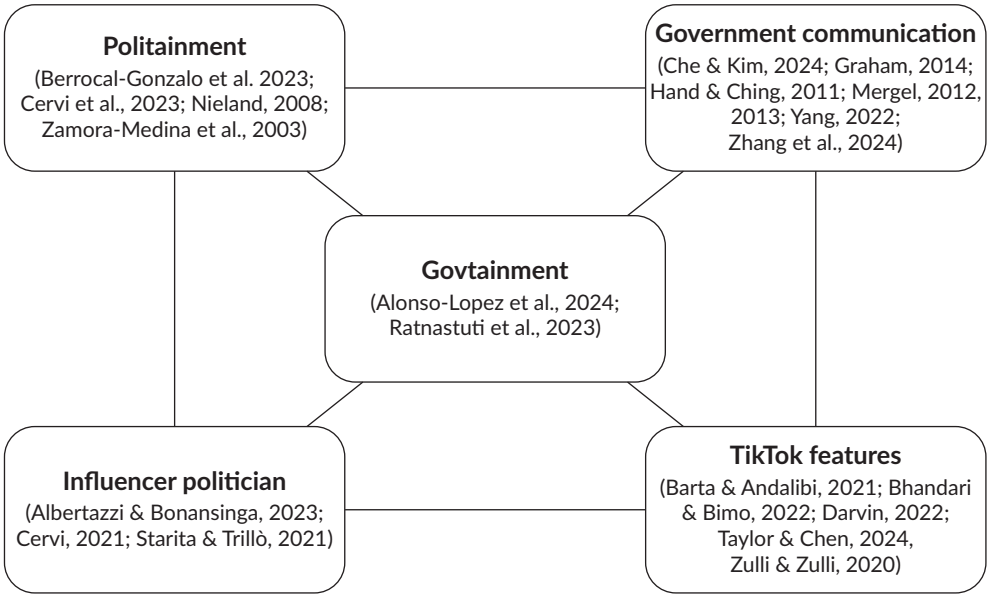


Figure 1. Theoretical framework diagram.

Given the increase in the number of users and the role that social networks currently play in shaping public opinion, it is therefore pertinent to analyse public institutions' communication strategies on TikTok and the interaction between public administrations and citizens on this network. We intend to bridge this gap and explore if the communication strategy adopted by Romanian ministries on TikTok is impacted by the platform's specific nature, what resulted in terms of engagement, and, finally, if we can identify elements of govtainment in this communication strategy. Our research questions are as follows:

> RQ1: To what extent can we identify elements of "humanisation" in the communication strategy of the Romanian Ministry of Defence and the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs on TikTok?
>
> RQ2: To what extent can we identify elements of spectacularisation in the communication strategy of the Romanian Ministry of Defence and the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs on TikTok?
>
> RQ3: What is the impact of these elements of humanisation and spectacularisation on the engagement of the audience on these two accounts?

3. Methodology

Our research employs quantitative and qualitative content analysis (Berelson, 1952; Macnamara, 2018) of TikTok publications by the two Romanian ministries concerned: the Ministry of Defence and the Ministry of

Internal Affairs, the only two ministries that maintain a consistent presence on TikTok. Although three other Romanian ministries have a temporary, non-consistent presence on TikTok, we did not include them in our analysis as their consistency or impact could not compare with the two selected (see Table 1). None of the other 11 Romanian ministries had a presence on TikTok at the time the data were collected.

Table 1. List of Romanian ministries and their TikTok presence in February 2025.

Ministry	TikTok account status	Number of followers
Ministry of Internal Affairs	Active (verified)	161k
Ministry of Defence	Inactive (verified)	452k
Ministry of Education and Research	Inactive (unverified)	12k
Ministry of Culture	Active (verified)	343
Ministry of Investments and European Projects	Active (unverified)	1k

We used the Apify TikTok Extractor to scrape all the publications on the two accounts from their creation up to 28 February 2025 (the date on which the data scraping was performed retrospectively). For the Romanian Ministry of Defence (@armataromaniei), the videos scraped were posted from 4 August 2019 to 1 June 2023 (there has been no activity on the account since that date). For the Ministry of Internal Affairs (@mai.gov), videos were posted between 28 May 2022 and 8 February 2025. The total amount of TikTok videos, commonly known as "TikToks," analysed from the Romanian Ministry of Defence account was 100 (n = 100), and from the Ministry of Internal Affairs, 81 (n = 81). Both accounts are verified.

Once the data scraping was completed, the number of followers of the Ministry of Defence amounted to 452k followers and 6.7 million likes for all the TikToks posted. The Ministry of Internal Affairs' number of followers amounted to 161k followers and 1.8 million likes for their videos.

Our coding analysis is inspired by models provided by Cervi et al. (2021), Cervi et al. (2023), and Zamora-Medina et al. (2023), all of which are adapted for governmental communication. Key variables analysed include the degree of humanisation, the degree of spectacularisation, and the degree of viralisation, as described next.

In order to evaluate the degree of humanisation in communication (similar to personalisation, as a persuasive resource on TikTok, according to Zamora-Medina et al., 2023), we analysed the character(s) featured in the TikTok videos. This trait of humanisation can be seen as the equivalent of personalisation in the field of political communication, but adapted to the context of institutional communication. In this case, it is important to determine if the organisations concerned choose to adopt a more personal and relatable presence on social media, or whether they prefer to maintain a more distant and impersonal representation of themselves. Our objective was to determine whether the two institutions favoured a collective or impersonal representation—such as groups of people without individual distinction or videos devoid of human presence—or, conversely, whether themes related to the army and interior affairs were personalised through the presence of specific, identifiable characters.

In order to evaluate the degree of spectacularisation, we analysed the use of TikTok trends, tone, theme, format, sound, and captions. These categories aim to assess the extent of the politainment dimension, examining how one's public communication strategy is shaped by the necessity to be engaging and entertaining.

To evaluate the degree of viralisation, we analysed the use of hashtags with the aim of determining whether the institutions leveraged this tool to enhance content reach. Additionally, we examined the number of comments, views, and likes to assess the impact of the posted content and correlate it with other variables. Furthermore, we categorised speech acts in the video text as assertive, commissive, directive, expressive, or declarative (Allan, 1997; Searle, 1979) to identify whether the two ministries favoured specific modes of address to engage users effectively. The post with the highest number of views and likes on each account was analysed from an interpretative perspective linking the theme with other elements in the spectacularisation category to understand the impact produced.

Numbers related to views, comments, and likes, as well as the presence of hashtags and sounds, were automatically retrieved by the Apify TikTok Extractor. All the other categories were coded manually, and the statistical data were processed in Excel. Due to the constraints related to sample size and platform variability, we adopted a descriptive analytical approach to ensure transparency and contextual accuracy in our analysis of TikTok content. Specifically, the platform's algorithmic volatility, and the dynamic nature of content visibility pose significant challenges to the assumptions required for inferential statistical analysis (e.g., randomness, independence, and generalizability). For instance, TikTok's algorithm tailors content delivery based on individual user behaviour and engagement patterns, making it difficult to establish stable baselines or control for variables across samples.

Consequently, a codebook (see Table 2) was created to break the content down into observable variables for humanisation, spectacularisation, and viralisation. Subcodes were assigned to some of the main codes, either deductively (e.g., for speech acts and formats) or inductively (e.g., for character, themes, and tone). The presence or absence of each code was recorded using binary values (1/0), except for metrics such as views, likes, and comments, which were captured as numerical data. The coding process was carried out by a single researcher. In order to assess inter-code reliability, a PhD candidate independently coded a subsample of 45 TikTok videos using the predefined codebook developed by the primary researcher. The resulting Cohen's Kappa coefficient value of 0.81 indicated a strong coding consistency.

For the categories of character and theme, one subcode was assigned to each TikTok. A "relaxed" tone was attributed to videos that addressed serious topics but incorporated a popular song as background music. An "amusing" tone was coded for videos that included explicit humour or depicted light-hearted incidents. A "formal-informative" tone applied to TikToks that primarily provided information, while a "formal-warning" tone was used for videos aiming to alert citizens to potential dangers. Regarding format, the category of "natural life footage" included scenes depicting everyday moments. "Sketches" were coded as staged scenes in which these ministries' employees re-enacted popular TikTok trends. "Monologues" align with TikTok's native content style, referring to a single person speaking directly to the audience in front of the camera. Videos that were edited to look like movies—namely, those using dramatic lighting, smooth camera movements, and colour grading—were grouped under the "cinematic scene" format. In terms of speech acts, the category of "assertive" included mainly informative statements. The "commissive" category encompassed recommendations, commitments, or warnings. "Call to action" described speech acts encouraging the audience to perform a specific action (e.g., "Let's do duets!"), while "interpellation" described speech acts intended to foster engagement by addressing the audience directly (e.g., "Do you know it?") and "expressive"—a wish (e.g., "MAI wishes you a wonderful spring!", "Happy birthday, Romania!").

Table 2. List of codes and subcodes.

Politainment variables	Codes	Ministry of Defence Subcodes	Ministry of Internal Affairs Subcodes
Humanisation	Character(s)	military personnel (collective)	riot police forces (collective)
		single soldier	single police officer
		soldier and family	police forces (collective)
		no human presence	firefighters (collective)
			ministry employees (collective)
Spectacularisation	Trends		
	Tone	formal-informative	
		formal-warning	
		relaxed	
		amusing	
		emotional	
	Theme	military personnel activities	police forces' activities
		ministry promotion	traffic rules
		military-family scenes	practical information for citizens
		TikTok trends	events
		fake news debunking	culture
		other	admission to the Police Academy
			ministry officials
	Format	natural life footage	
		cinematic scenes	
		monologues	
		sketches	
		interviews	
	Sound		
	Captions		
Viralisation	Hashtags		
	Views		
	Likes		
	Comments		
	Speech acts	assertive	
		expressive	
		commissive	
		call to action	
		interpellation	
		invitation	

4. Findings

4.1. Humanisation

When analysing the characters featured in the Ministry of Defence's TikTok content, we find that collective representation, labelled as "military personnel," dominates 60% of the videos. However, in 31% of the TikToks, there is a clear effort toward humanisation, as a single soldier (either male or female) serves as the main character. Additionally, 7% of the videos contain no human presence, focusing solely on military assets.

A noteworthy mention should be made regarding two TikToks (2%) that depict emotionally charged scenes involving military personnel and their families. In one of these videos, a female soldier is embraced by her family upon returning from a mission, while in another, a soldier proposes to his girlfriend in a surprise scene orchestrated by his comrades.

In 51.9% of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' TikTok posts, the main character is a police officer (a policewoman in seven posts). In the remaining posts, we identified a collective character, represented by riot police forces (14.8%), general police forces (11.1%), firefighters (2.4%), and ministry employees in general (8.7%). Ministry officials appeared in only 2.5% of the TikTok posts, exclusively in content related to Romania's inclusion in the Schengen area. Additionally, 4.9% of the TikToks featured no human character, instead showcasing assets, vehicles, or scenes of police operations, while in 3.7% of the posts there are other types of characters.

Moreover, when a single police officer serves as the main character, the content typically involves presenting traffic regulations or providing public safety information, such as warnings about the dangers of using firecrackers. Notably, in four TikToks featuring either a policeman or policewoman as the main character, the officer is portrayed as an idealised, attractive figure, reminiscent of viral TikToks romanticising the appearance of Italian police officers (see Figure 2). These videos frequently adopt a dramatic cinematic style, depicting the officer in action with dynamic background music, resembling an actor on a film set.



Figure 2. TikToks featuring a police officer in a cinematic style.

In these instances, there is no verbal communication. The visual framing and stylistic approach remain consistent for both male and female police officers.

Although collective actors remain prevalent—or even dominant in the case of the Ministry of Defence's communication strategy—the analysis reveals a significant effort toward achieving humanisation across both ministries' accounts. Both institutions strategically choose to present an individual police officer or soldier as the voice of the institution, sometimes in highly specific and personal contexts.

4.2. Spectacularisation

4.2.1. Trends

The Ministry of Defence incorporates TikTok trends in 24% of its videos, while the Ministry of Internal Affairs does so in 18.5% of its TikToks. Although most of their content does not strictly follow the platform's trends, a significant number of videos attempt to increase visibility by using trending formats.

For the Ministry of Internal Affairs, we identified the use of trends in several ways: namely, before-and-after transformations employing transitions (e.g., riot police officers appearing in one uniform and then transitioning into another) set to viral music; a sketch using a trending TikTok sound, where a police officer captions the video with "Tell me something to make me angry"; and another sketch featuring a viral sound to humorously depict a driver's panic upon seeing a fine being issued.

In the case of the Ministry of Defence, the use of TikTok trends is even more explicit. The ministry engages with popular dances, the "ASMR" trend (short for "autonomous sensory meridian response," which on TikTok refers to the physical sensations triggered by specific sounds), the capybara trend, transition effects, and trending audio sounds.

Even if the use of trending is not to be seen in the majority of posts, it is significant on both accounts, thus proving the presence of a concern to use viralisation elements that could increase engagement and the visibility of these posts.

4.2.2. Tone

Given that TikTok is generally perceived as a platform where humour plays a central role, we sought to determine whether the Romanian ministries concerned adapt their communication strategies to align with this characteristic. In the case of the Ministry of Defence, the predominant tone identified (see Figure 3) was "relaxed" (65%), followed by "formal-informative" (19%), "amusing" (13%), "formal-warning" (2%), and "emotional" (1%). A "relaxed" tone was assigned to videos showcasing military personnel activities with a popular song as background sound. An "amusing" tone was present in a video where a squirrel was running among military personnel, or in others in which soldiers were synchronising their movements in a TikTok dance.

For the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the distribution of tones was more balanced: "Amusing" (19.7%) and "relaxed" (33.3%) tones were nearly equal to "formal-informative" (30.8%) and "formal-warning" (16%) tones.

The "amusing" tone included TikToks that presented topics such as traffic rules or riot police activities in a humorous manner, often utilising TikTok trends or viral sounds. The "relaxed" tone applied to videos showcasing police activities, typically set to music without additional verbal communication. The "informative" tone was frequently used to convey information about traffic regulations or Schengen area circulation rules, while the "warning" tone served to highlight the consequences of traffic violations, fire hazards, or to counter misinformation regarding police forces.

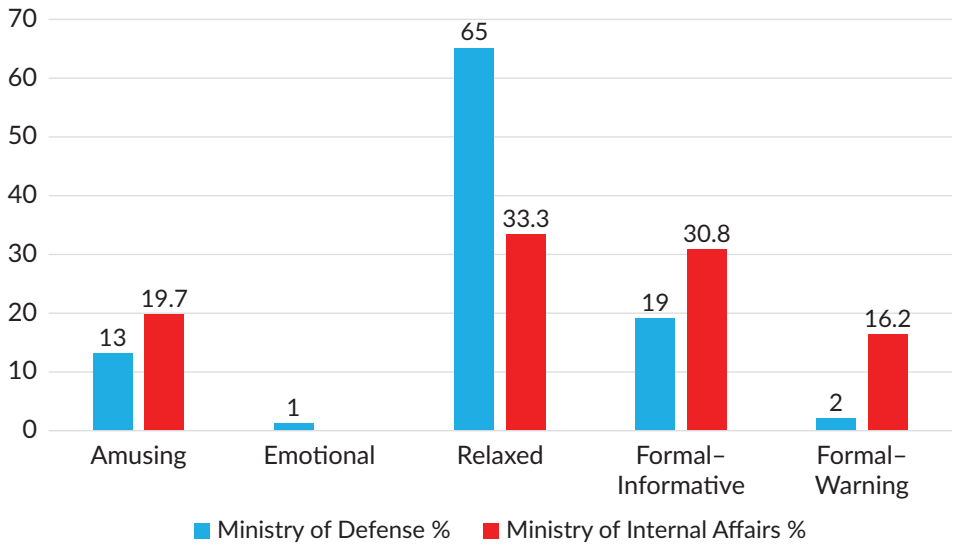


Figure 3. The distribution of tones (%) in the TikTok posts on the two accounts under discussion.

The predominance of the "relaxed" and "amusing" tones (cumulated) across both accounts (78% on the Ministry of Defence account and 53% on the Ministry of Internal Affairs account) demonstrates a clear adaptation to TikTok's predominant style. This shift highlights a distinct communication approach compared to other social media platforms utilised by the two ministries, such as Facebook and X.

4.2.3. Theme

We analysed the themes of the TikToks posted by both public institutions to determine whether they continue to focus on the serious topics typically found on their official websites and on other social media channels or if there is a noticeable shift in their thematic approach. For the Ministry of Defence, the most frequent theme is the activities of military personnel, accounting for 52% of the posts, followed by promotion of the ministry (14%), events (13%), military-family scenes (5%), TikTok trends (5%), fake news debunking (3%), and other topics (8%). In some cases, TikToks were coded under the "trends" theme as their primary purpose was to recreate a viral TikTok trend rather than to convey a distinct institutional message. Apart from this last specific situation, we did not discover any visible influence of the TikTok platform on the category of theme.

On the Ministry of Internal Affairs' TikTok account, the primary themes include police activities (33.3%), traffic rules (30.9%), practical information for citizens (17.3%), events (12.3%), culture (3.7%), and the promotion of admissions to the Police Academy (2.5%).

The two public institutions continue to communicate on their traditional topics, which are already present on their websites and other social media platforms (Facebook, X), without being significantly influenced by TikTok's generally lighter content. The impact of the platform is more evident in the way these topics are presented, as demonstrated by the analysis of other categories, rather than in the selection of topics themselves.

4.2.4. Format

The formats used by the two ministries do not closely follow TikTok's dominant and more commercial content styles, such as unboxings, hauls, mini-vlogs, or "get ready with me" (GRWM) videos. On the Ministry of Defence's account (see Figure 4), the identified formats include natural life footage (63%), cinematic scenes (14%), sketches (16%), monologues (5%), and interviews (2%). Under "sketches," we coded scenes in which military personnel re-enact popular TikTok trends, such as "point of view" (POV) videos, before-and-after transformations (depicting individuals or groups before and after joining the military), or dance challenges. All of these were present in the Ministry of Defence's posts.

On the Ministry of Internal Affairs' TikTok account (see Figure 4), natural life footage is also the dominant format (51.9%), followed by monologues (28.4%) and sketches (19.8%). Monologues are particularly well-suited to TikTok's format. In these monologues, it is usually a police officer explaining traffic regulations or providing practical information. In the sketches, police officers actively engage in role-playing. For example, some sketches involve officers participating in TikTok trends, such as "Tell me you're a cop without telling me you're a cop," while others depict police activities through role-play scenarios, including a driver's reaction upon receiving a fine or the way border police officers check documents.

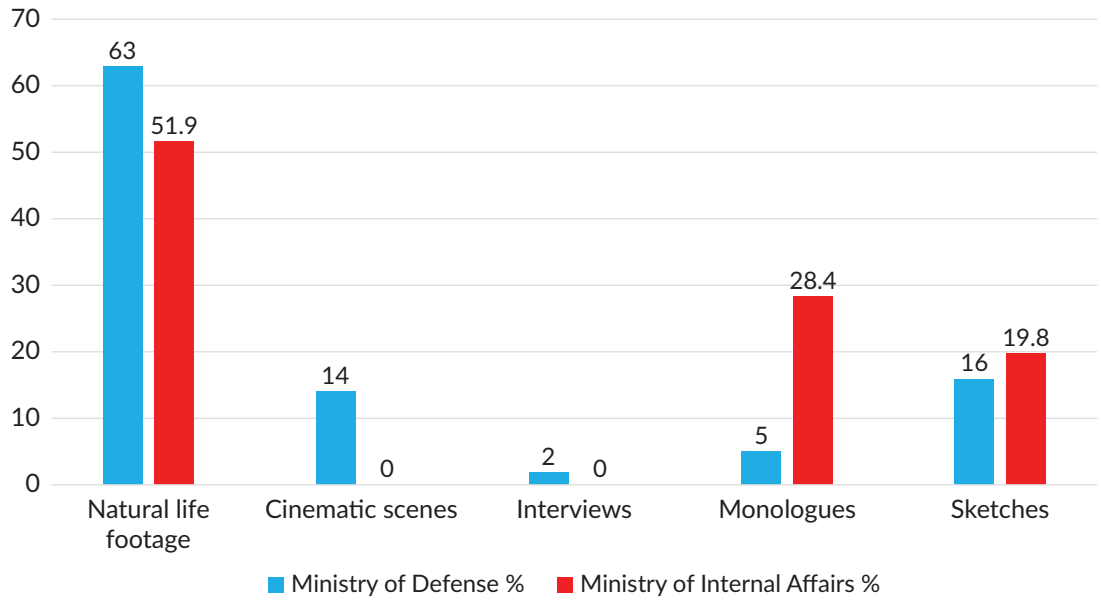


Figure 4. The distribution of formats (%) in the TikTok posts on the two accounts under discussion.

Both accounts exhibit a significant proportion of content tailored to platform-specific formats. Specifically, movie scenes, sketches, and monologues constitute 35% (cumulated) of the formats employed by the Ministry

of Defence, while monologues and sketches account for 48.2% (cumulated) of those utilised by the Ministry of Internal Affairs.

4.2.5. Sound

The incorporation of viral TikTok sounds or songs serves as a key variable in assessing content adaptation and its entertainment value. Given that TikTok's algorithm prioritises videos utilising trending sounds, and that these sounds foster community engagement, their strategic use can significantly enhance a video's reach and visibility. The Ministry of Defence utilises them in 39% of TikToks, whereas the Ministry of Internal Affairs employs TikTok music or sound effects in only 7% of its videos. This disparity aligns with the Ministry of Defence's observed propensity for trend adoption, suggesting a deliberate effort to maximise content visibility. The Ministry of Defence's notable incorporation of TikTok sounds signifies the institution's adaptation to platform-specific viralisation practices.

4.2.6. Captions

Even if the use of captions on videos is not specific to TikTok, with captions being widely used across multiple platforms such as Instagram Reels, YouTube Shorts, and Facebook Videos, TikTok has made captions a mainstream and essential feature in short-form content. Captions are popular on TikTok because they make content more accessible and provide better engagement (as many users watch videos on mute, captions keep them engaged), they allow one to emphasise key moments in the video, and they enhance the storytelling by allowing a trendy editing style. On the Ministry of Defence's TikTok account, captions appear in only 4% of the videos, whereas they are present in 30.8% of the Ministry of Internal Affairs' TikToks. None of the analysed videos utilised TikTok's built-in auto-caption feature. Instead, captions were manually added through text overlays, sometimes incorporating emojis to introduce an element of entertainment, even in videos addressing serious topics such as traffic regulations.

These findings highlight that the Ministry of Internal Affairs actively integrates this TikTok-specific feature (captions on video) to improve content accessibility and enhance user engagement.

4.3. Viralisation

4.3.1. The Use of Hashtags

Using hashtags increases discoverability and reach because trending hashtags boost the chances of appearing on the "For You" page on TikTok. It also helps the algorithm understand the content and recommend certain content to relevant users. Moreover, it can also boost engagement because users can engage more if they identify with a certain hashtag. The Ministry of Internal Affairs incorporates hashtags in 90% of its TikTok videos, with the number of hashtags ranging from a minimum of 2 to a maximum of 14. Similarly, the Ministry of Defence employs hashtags in 89% of its videos, with a range of 2 to 12 hashtags per post. In both cases, we identified two primary categories of hashtag usage. The first category aims to reinforce the institution's digital identity, including hashtags such as #mai (the ministry's Romanian abbreviation), #ministerulafacerilorinterne (Ministry of Internal Affairs), #politiaromana (Romanian Police), #brigadarutiera (Road Brigade), #mapn (the Romanian abbreviation for the Ministry of Defence), #army, and

#armataromaniei (Romanian Army). The second category consists of hashtags designed to enhance the reach and visibility of TikTok posts, such as #fy, #foryou, #trending, #asmr, #viral, and #dance.

The analysis of hashtag usage demonstrates that both ministries strategically leverage this feature to optimise engagement and visibility. Their approach effectively combines identity-building hashtags with popular, trend-based hashtags to maximise their reach on the platform.

4.3.2. Views, Likes, and Comments

The Ministry of Defence has an average play count of 577k, with a minimum of 162k and a maximum of 3.2M. The average of likes is 52k, with a minimum of 16k and a maximum of 301k. The average number of comments is 453, while the average of shares is 1,049. The TikTok video that got the highest number of views on the Ministry of Defence account (3.2 million) also has an impressive number of likes (301k) and almost 2k comments. The video (see Figure 5a) captures the recording of the army physical, a test required for admission to military academies. As reflected in the comments, users actively engage by either criticising the candidate's performance or debating the difficulty level of the exercises. This interaction, regardless of its nature, contributes significantly to the post's virality. We can also explain the virality of the video clip by the fact that it presents a reality close to that of young TikTok users (admission to the military academy), with a high potential for identification.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs has an average play count of 449k, with a minimum of 4k and a maximum of 4.5M. The average number of likes is 20.8k with a minimum of 127 and a maximum of 193k. The average number of comments is 288, while the average number of shares is 1,167. The most-viewed TikTok on this account (see Figure 5b), with 4.5 million views, is a warning about the consequences of not wearing a seatbelt.



Figure 5. Screenshots of the most popular video (a) on the Ministry of Defence TikTok account, and (b) on the Ministry of Internal Affairs TikTok account.

It also holds the highest number of likes (193k), while the comments (2k) primarily discuss specific situations related to seatbelt use or inquire about exceptions to the rule.

The engagement metrics for both accounts indicate a high level of user involvement, demonstrating that the communication strategies employed are effective and impactful.

We also measured the engagement-to-post ratio (EPR) in relation to various variables, such as tone, trends, and speech acts, in order to assess their impact on the level of engagement each post receives. The EPR measures how much engagement (likes, comments, and shares) a post generates relative to how frequently a tone, trend, or speech act is used. A higher EPR means that even with fewer posts, a tone, trend, or speech act generates a high level of interactions. The EPR formula calculates a weighted engagement score based on the relative impact of likes, shares, and comments, normalised by posting frequency:

$$EPR = (1 \times Likes\% + 2 \times Shares\% + 3 \times Comments\%)/Posts\%$$

In the case of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (see Figure 6b), the "formal" tone ("formal-warning" and "formal-informative") generates the most engagement per post (18.5 EPR and 5.84 EPR, respectively). The "amusing" tone is effective but not as strong as the formal one with 5.39 EPR. Surprisingly, as we are analysing a TikTok account, the "relaxed" tone has very low engagement relative to its usage (0.49 EPR). On the Ministry of Defence account (see Figure 6a), also the "formal-warning" tone is performing the best (14.52 EPR), followed by the "relaxed" (6.23 EPR), the "formal-informative" (5.53 EPR), the "emotional" (2.68 EPR), and the "amusing" (2.68 EPR).

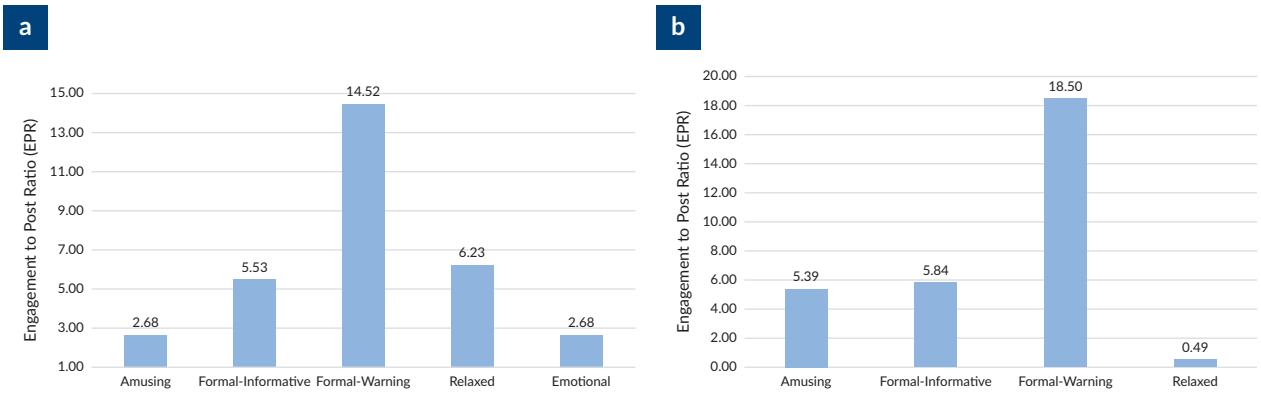


Figure 6. EPR by tone: (a) Ministry of Defence and (b) Ministry of Internal Affairs.

These correlations indicate that although public institutions attempt to shift from a formal mode of communication to a more "relaxed" or "amusing" tone, this approach is not particularly well received by their audience. Instead, the formal tone continues to generate the highest level of engagement. A possible explanation for this trend lies in the effectiveness of the "warning" tone, which performs the best across both accounts. This could be attributed to its ability to evoke human fears and concerns, making it more impactful. Additionally, user comments suggest a resistance to humour in institutional communication, as some users explicitly criticise this approach by questioning its appropriateness, often remarking: "Is this what the army/police do?"

When measuring the EPR in relation to the presence or not of TikTok trends (see Figure 7), the numbers for the Minister of Internal Affairs show that the posts using trends (29.1 EPR) performed much better than those without a trend (0.75 EPR). On the account of the Ministry of Defence, the distribution was more balanced, with a 4.64 EPR for posts including trends and 6.43 for posts with no trend included. These numbers partially confirmed that using trends improves engagement on the accounts of the ministries concerned.

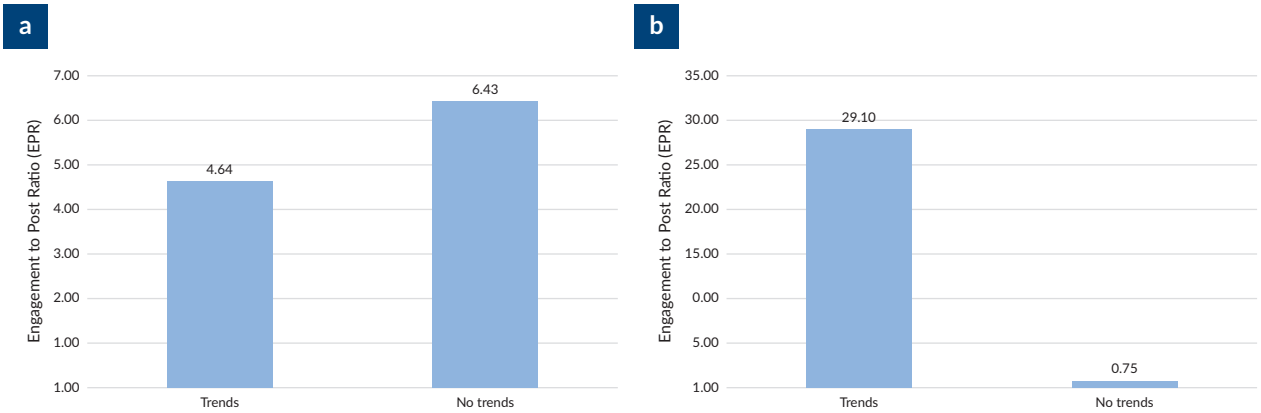


Figure 7. EPR by trends: (a) Ministry of Defence and (b) Ministry of Internal Affairs.

4.3.3. Speech Acts

As we noticed that several posts on both accounts used interpellation or call to action, we also analysed the distribution of speech acts in the text of the TikToks and then correlated them to the engagement (EPR).

The account of the Ministry of Defence has interpellation in 34% of the posts, while 28% of the posts are assertive (informative), 17% commissive (recommendation, commitment, or warning), 15% a call to action, 5% expressive (a wish), and 1% constitute an invitation. As interpellations are particularly effective in order to encourage engagement, the Ministry of Defence frequently uses them: "Who is helping us with a duet?" "Do you know it?" "Which uniform do you like the most?" etc. This way of addressing the public is particularly effective in order to make your community feel involved with the content posted, and may partially explain the strong engagement performance of these accounts. The calls to action are even more engaging as they encourage users to act in different ways: "Let's do duets!" "Come on with the hearts!!!!" "Stay informed only from official sources!" Users are incited either to post content, to react to the post, or to develop responsible behaviour related to the phenomenon of online fake news.

On the account of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the analysis of speech acts is less relevant, as in 70.4% of the posts there is no text attached, meaning we could not code any speech act. In 16% of the posts there is an interpellation, in 9.9% of the posts there is an assertive speech act (informative), while expressive speech acts (a wish) amount to 2.5% and calls to action to 1.2% of the posts. Interpellations are interesting to emphasise as they actively seek to engage the audience by prompting direct involvement. Examples include: "We are here. And you? "Do you know how to stay safe online?" "Do you know who can use the public transport lanes?" "What is your childhood dream?" These questions not only encourage interaction but also create a sense of dialogue between the institution and the public, reinforcing engagement and participation.

This analysis proves that both accounts are eager to use speech acts that, in theory, are supposed to generate more engagement and make the audience react and get involved: Interpellations and calls to action (cumulated) amount to 49% on the Ministry of Defence account and 17.2% on the Ministry of Internal Affairs account.

We correlated speech acts with the posts' level of engagement (see Figure 8). For the Ministry of Internal Affairs, it was the assertive (informative content, factual statements) posts that got the highest engagement (16 EPR), followed by interpellation (5.67 EPR). Surprisingly, posts that encourage action (calls to action) received relatively low engagement per post (3.22 EPR), which suggests that audiences do not respond well to direct requests or might find them less compelling. Expressive acts (a wish) have the lowest engagement per post (2.52 EPR). This indicates that emotion-driven content may not be as effective for generating engagement. On the Ministry of Defence account, on the contrary, there are expressive acts that get the highest engagement (14.4 EPR). Commissive speech acts also perform relatively well (6.6 EPR). In contrast to the Ministry of Internal Affairs account, calls to action now perform better and seem more effective. Interpellation and assertive posts perform worse than on the account of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, with values of 5.4 EPR and 4.8 EPR, respectively.

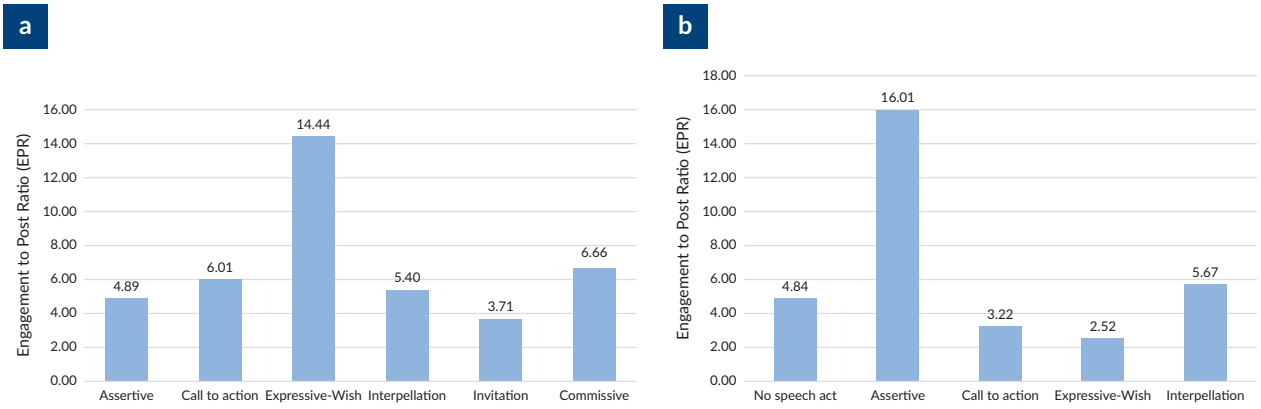


Figure 8. EPR by speech act: (a) Ministry of Defence and (b) Ministry of Internal Affairs.

Surprisingly, on both accounts, it is not speech acts such as interpellation and calls to action that get the best engagement, but assertive and expressive acts.

5. Discussion

Our analysis shows how these two ministries disseminate information to the public through TikTok, focusing on the spectacularisation of the content in order to make it attractive to a targeted public audience (in these two cases, a young audience, one targeted to join the army or the police forces), as is also happening in the field of political communication (Gómez-García et al., 2023).

5.1. Humanisation

When analysing to what extent we can identify elements of humanisation in the Romanian Ministry of Defence's and the Romanian Ministry of Internal Affairs' communication on TikTok (RQ1), the findings reveal a shift toward humanisation in both cases. Although collective actors remain present, both institutions increasingly use individual representatives, such as policemen or military personnel, to humanise their

messages. This shift aligns with social media's preference for relatable, human-centred storytelling. By featuring officers in personal or situational contexts, the ministries concerned create a sense of authenticity, making their messages more engaging and credible. This effort towards humanisation can be compared to the phenomenon of personalisation in political communication (Cervi, 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023), where political leaders become central to communication.

5.2. Spectacularisation

The analysis of the spectacularisation elements in response to RQ2 reveals that the communication of the two ministries is more influenced by the platform in terms of the use of formats and trends (partially in the use of sounds and captions) than in the choice of the posts' themes.

The use of relaxed and amusing tones further supports the humanisation strategy, differentiating the two ministries TikTok communication from their more formal approaches on platforms like Facebook or X and confirming the mixing of public information with entertainment (as in politainment—see Alonso-López et al., 2024) in order to make the topic more interesting and attractive to the audience (Ratnastuti et al., 2023). However, the EPR suggests that formal and warning tones still generate the highest engagement, likely due to their authoritative nature and the seriousness of the topics addressed and to the public perception concerning the role the two ministries have in governing the country.

The analysis also indicates that both ministries incorporate TikTok trends in order to increase visibility, with the Ministry of Defence using trends in 24% of its content and the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 18.5%. This includes popular formats such as before-and-after transformations, viral sound-based sketches, and even ASMR content. While not the dominant strategy, this effort reflects an awareness of TikTok's algorithmic preferences, which favour trending content for broader reach. While the Ministry of Defence embraces TikTok's viral mechanics more actively, with 39% its videos using TikTok sounds compared to 7% for the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the latter compensates for this by utilising captions in 30.8% of its videos to enhance accessibility and engagement. The spectacularisation (González-Aguilar et al., 2023) of institutional communication is further reinforced by the use of cinematic video editing, role-playing, and humour.

However, despite this effort to make the content popular, engagement data suggest that traditional, more serious content often outperforms trend-driven content. For the Ministry of Internal Affairs, posts utilising trends had a significantly higher EPR (29.1) compared to non-trend posts (0.75), indicating that trends can drive engagement in some instances.

5.3. Viralisation

Viralisation efforts are evident in both ministries' use of hashtags and speech acts designed to encourage interaction. Hashtags play a crucial role in increasing discoverability, with both institutions using identity-related tags alongside viral ones such as #fy, #foryou, and #trending. Interestingly, despite a strong emphasis on audience engagement through interpellations and calls to action, these speech acts did not generate the highest engagement. Instead, assertive and expressive speech acts performed the best, suggesting that audiences respond more positively to informative or emotionally resonant content rather than direct interaction prompts. This implies that while viralisation tactics are crucial for reach, content

substance remains the key driver of meaningful engagement with public institutions' communications. When assessing the impact of humanisation and spectacularisation on engagement (RQ3), we noticed that the average of views (577k for the Ministry of Defence and 449k for the Ministry of Internal Affairs) and likes (52k and 20.8k) for both accounts is impressive, showing the success of their strategies on TikTok. These findings demonstrate that there is an evolution in the government's communication on social media from a unilateral logic (Sáez Martín et al., 2015; Wukich & Mergel, 2015) to a bilateral one, trying to generate audience participation.

6. Conclusion

This case study underscores TikTok's role as a tool for strategic communication, providing insights into its potential for engaging and informing specific demographic groups. This research highlights the necessity for further research into the effects of spectacularized government information and its potential to cultivate a frivolous or superficial perception of politics among audiences. Our findings indicate that, similar to the case of political communication governmental communication on TikTok is often trivialised, not primarily through thematic content, but rather through the use of specific formats, tones, trends, and modes of address aimed at broadening audience reach. By adopting popular trends, viral audio, interpellations, and calls to action, governmental institutions are not only seeking to make information more appealing, but also aiming to foster greater engagement with audiences—an aspect that could have significant implications for the accountability of public communication strategies.

The analysis shows that both ministries are adapting their communication to the characteristics of the platform and are actively using elements that could increase the virality of the posts, such as tone, picking up on viral trends or sounds, formats, speech acts, or even humanisation of their communication. This adaptation is happening in the way information is presented rather than in the themes about which the institutions communicate, themes that remain largely congruent with those they use on other social media channels. These data confirm the existence of govtainement elements in the communication strategy of the two accounts, as noticed in other analyses focusing on government communication strategies (Alonso-López et al., 2024; Ratnastuti et al., 2023), a phenomenon similar to the politainment trend (Albertazzi & Bonansinga, 2023; Battista, 2023; Berrocal-Gonzalo et al., 2023; Cervi et al., 2021). We consider our findings to indicate a new stage in government communication with a deliberate strategy of using TikTok features in a professional way (using trends, specific formats, relaxed and amusing tones, hashtags, etc.), but also openly trying to engage audiences with interpellations and calls to action.

However, when we correlated elements of spectacularisation, such as the existence of trends, the tone used, and speech acts, with the engagement achieved, the presence of these elements does not automatically translate into the highest engagement rates. One of the explanations for this is that the audience considers that a more informative post, not necessarily one including all possible spectacularisation elements on TikTok, is more congruent with the type of communication that ministries should have, even on this platform. This attitude is reflected in certain user comments on TikTok content that employs popular trends, where criticism is directed at the involvement of institutions such as the army or police in entertaining or light-hearted content (e.g., "Is this what the army/police do?"). Further analysis of user comments may yield a more nuanced understanding of this aspect of public response.

Overall, the communication strategy of the two public institutions on TikTok examined here is successful when we look at the engagement figures. We can therefore conclude they are successfully adapting their communication strategy to the platform, a phenomenon which was not the case in other analyses that investigated government communication strategies on TikTok (Alonso-López et al., 2024; Yang, 2022) or even those concerning political communication (Cervi et al., 2023; Zamora-Medina et al., 2023). However, we cannot conclude that success is determined by this adaptation, even if it partially contributes to it.

The research shows that the two ministries have successfully embedded govtainment elements in their public communication strategies and effectively adapted to TikTok's available features, achieving notable engagement and visibility. Although this success reflects institutional agility in order to increase accessibility of public messages, it also raises concerns about the potential trivialisation of complex policy issues when reduced to trend-driven content.

Government communication is increasingly under pressure to engage younger audiences and, following the model of political communication, appears to be shifting to govtainment. However, this approach may affect public trust, as audiences might not be prepared to perceive government institutions as compatible with an entertainment-driven style.

We consider that the research questions have been specifically addressed through this study. However, future research could further investigate how these public institutions conceptualise their TikTok communication strategies, potentially by getting insights from communication experts. Subsequent studies might also explore audience perceptions of ministerial communication on TikTok, for instance through comment analysis or survey-based approaches.

7. Limitations

Our study presents several limitations. Our analysis is context-specific, focusing solely on Romania, which means the findings may not be directly applicable to other countries with different political, social, or digital media environments. The corpus of analysed TikToks was limited by the fact that the coding was partially conducted manually, which constrained the volume of data that could be processed. These limitations highlight the need for further studies that include comparative analyses across multiple countries and leverage automated tools for broader data collection and analysis. Finally, although the descriptive statistical approach limits the generalizability of the findings, it allows for a focused examination of observable patterns within the available data.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Bucharest – Faculty of Journalism and Communication Studies and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

The dataset is available from the author upon request.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT 4.0 was used for grammar and style improvement in some parts of the manuscript.

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10681
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10681

ARTICLE

Open Access Journal

Migrant Social Media Influencers as Vernacular CERC Agents: Mediating Government Communication During Covid-19

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Submitted: 30 April 2025 **Accepted:** 16 October 2025 **Published:** 25 November 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

Effective government communication is crucial for promoting inclusive governance, especially in increasingly diverse societies. However, a significant gap remains in engaging residents with migration backgrounds, often leaving these communities underinformed and underserved in public discourse. This shortfall becomes especially critical during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic. Among transnational migrants in various countries, social networks were the main sources of information about Covid-19. Social media influencers with migration backgrounds became crucial transmitters of governmental information to their audiences. For instance, in 2020, Russian-speaking female bloggers in almost 40 countries started a global discussion about the Covid-19 outbreak on Instagram. This article presents the results of a content analysis of 113 Instagram posts by 58 Russian-speaking female influencers in 37 countries during the first wave of the Covid-19 pandemic. It demonstrates that influencers acted as primary information sources. Instead of relying on news media, they spread information from governmental sources to audiences within their countries of residence and globally. In this article, I highlight how strategic use of social media can bridge the communication divide, ensuring that residents with migration backgrounds integrate better into the public information ecosystem while balancing public service with ethical governance.

Keywords

Covid-19; digital public; government communication; health communication; influencers; migration; social media

1. Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic strained healthcare systems and economies globally, placing unprecedented pressure on communication infrastructures. Governments' capacity to disseminate timely, comprehensible,

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and trustworthy information emerged as a critical component of crisis management (Lerouge et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Maldonado et al., 2020). Public health experts noted that ensuring populations have access to accurate information is essential for effective outbreak control (Kalocsányiová et al., 2023; Li et al., 2021; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005).

Structural inequalities in information access leave many migrant communities underserved, stigmatized, and particularly vulnerable to the virus (Kalocsányiová et al., 2023; Maldonado et al., 2020; Wang & Navarro Nicoletti, 2025). Studies showed that migrants frequently encounter barriers to accessing public health information including linguistic obstacles and a lack of culturally adapted content (Kalocsányiová et al., 2023; Roble et al., 2022; Seale et al., 2023). Scholars and public health practitioners recommend integrating trusted figures, including social media influencers (SMIs), within immigrant communities to facilitate more equitable and effective information dissemination (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Roble et al., 2022; Tjaden et al., 2022).

Whereas governmental health communication during the pandemic relied heavily on traditional top–down channels, the rise of networked digital platforms enabled parallel information flows (Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Li et al., 2021). Within this ecosystem, SMIs became communicative actors with the potential to mobilize trust and shape behavioral norms (Abidin et al., 2021; Klucarova, 2022). In leveraging their personal credibility, influencers were often perceived as more authentic and accessible than official authorities (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022), particularly among audiences already socially or politically distanced from state institutions. However, overreliance on unpaid digital actors raises concerns about responsibility, consistency, and the potential for disseminating misinformation.

This article examines the role of Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds in disseminating and recontextualizing governmental Covid-19 communication during the pandemic's early stages. Alongside Arabic, German, and Ukrainian, Russian is among the most common migrant languages in Europe (Maldonado et al., 2020). Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of Instagram posts created from a transnational influencer initiative between March and April 2020, this study investigated how these actors engaged with public health messaging, encouraged compliance with official directives, and cultivated trustworthiness within their digital communities.

By focusing on influencers with migration backgrounds as an underresearched yet increasingly influential subset of digital actors, this article contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how public health communication circulates beyond formal institutional channels. It argues that these influencers disseminated and adapted governmental information through affective, narrative, and vernacular strategies, enhancing its relevance and uptake within migrant publics.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Governmental Communication in Health Crises

Communication plays a fundamental role in governmental responses during public health emergencies. Effective communication is considered "the second most important weapon against the disease" after a vaccine (Barry, 2009, p. 324) and essential to a government's crisis management portfolio (Lee & Basnyat, 2013). In crises, governmental communication counteracts uncertainty by disseminating reliable information

(Giardini & Vilone, 2021; Hyland-Wood et al., 2021; Lerouge et al., 2023; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005). This study draws on crisis and emergency risk communication (CERC; Reynolds & Seeger, 2005) as a conceptual framework to understand how SMIs with migration backgrounds recontextualize governmental health messaging for migrant audiences.

As Reynolds and Seeger (2005) suggested in their five-stage model of CERC, effective communication in such contexts requires adjusting content to align with the public's needs at different stages of a crisis. This dynamic process was particularly evident during Covid-19 as governments modified their messaging strategies to address the initial urgency of containment measures and later incorporated broader health system updates and economic relief efforts. In the initial phases, characterized by heightened public fear and uncertainty, governmental messaging concentrated on lockdown measures and regulatory decrees (Lerouge et al., 2023). As the crisis unfolded, the emphasis shifted toward updates on the healthcare system's capacity and economic policies enacted to mitigate financial hardships (Lerouge et al., 2023). These shifts highlight the distinction between *crisis* and *risk* communication. The former is principally informative, involving "messages regarding current state or conditions regarding a specific event" (Reynolds & Seeger, 2005, p. 48); the latter, principally persuasive, focuses on "messages regarding known probabilities of negative consequences and how they may be reduced" (p. 48).

The information that ultimately reaches the public is rarely a direct transmission of government statements; rather, media coverage reframes and contextualizes it (Guidry et al., 2017; Lee & Basnyat, 2013). Among the various communication channels, social media has become particularly dominant in crisis management (Harrison & Johnson, 2019; Kavanaugh et al., 2016). It serves multiple roles, functioning as a real-time update channel and platform for public engagement and collaborative support (Seltzer et al., 2017; Zhang & Zhao, 2020). Although existing CERC-based research has examined institutional messaging and formal media channels' role, it paid relatively little attention to how informal communicators, like SMIs, translate and adapt these messages within multilingual, transnational digital networks.

The CERC model raised an important question about the reach of the "special population…any group that cannot be reached effectively during the initial phases of a public safety emergency with general public health messages delivered through mass communication channels" (Reynolds, 2007, p. 97). Based on the general CERC approach, Quinn (2008) developed an additional model for building resilience in minority communities, suggesting to "engage community partners who act as channels for communication" (p. 22). More recently, Seale et al. (2023) called these channels "information intermediaries." However, the literature has largely focused on institutional partnerships with recognized community leaders or nongovernmental organizations. The role of digitally native actors, particularly those not formally affiliated with institutions, remains underexplored in this context.

The CERC model emphasizes the importance of governments actively engaging informational partners—community leaders, organizations, and other intermediaries—to ensure crisis communication effectively reaches diverse audiences. However, despite recognizing the importance of tailored communication strategies, many governments struggle to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate information for migrant and minority communities (Kalocsányiová et al., 2023; Roble et al., 2022; Seale et al., 2023). Further, the literature has paid little attention to the fact that governmental communication mediation is not solely a top–down process. Thus, this article highlights SMIs with migration backgrounds as grassroots actors in

governmental crisis communication, a group rarely analyzed in this context. It reframes influencers as not merely content creators or commercial figures but mediators of state messaging during emergencies, thus extending the scope of actors relevant to the CERC framework.

Community actors often assume the role of information intermediaries, working proactively with open sources to meet their audiences' specific needs. These self-initiated efforts are especially significant in addressing information gaps for "special populations," who may be excluded from formal communication channels. Although several studies critiqued governmental shortcomings in inclusive health messaging, few investigated how noninstitutional actors spontaneously stepped into communicative functions typically reserved for official messengers. This article helps fill this gap by examining Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds residing across multiple countries who, during the Covid-19 pandemic, assumed the role of governmental communication mediators for their transnational audiences. Herein, "migration backgrounds" were operationalized as a first-generation relocation experience, referring to influencers who personally migrated and self-identified in their blogs as Russian-speaking individuals living abroad. The sample included content creators who resided in countries where Russian is not an official language and openly positioned their online presence around themes of migration, adaptation, or cross-cultural experiences.

2.2. Tailoring Communication for Vulnerable Groups During Pandemics

Effective communication in a public health emergency requires conveying information across media platforms, cultures, and languages (Quinn, 2008). Hyland-Wood et al. (2021) echoed this sentiment, stressing that governmental communication strategies must consider the diverse needs of society to ensure maximum support (see also Haw, 2024; Krystallidou & Braun, 2022). During the pandemic, many governments recognized the importance of knowing their audiences' communication preferences and tailored their strategies to meet these needs (Gonçalves et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, vulnerable populations, such as migrants, the elderly, and low-income communities, often face barriers to accessing timely and accurate health information due to linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic factors (Roble et al., 2022). Many government communication efforts failed to adequately address their needs, resulting in limited access to critical health guidance (Pourmarzi et al., 2022; Roble et al., 2022; Seale et al., 2023) due to language and cultural barriers (Maldonado et al., 2020). These communication barriers were not merely national failings; Piller et al. (2020) argued that they exposed the global consequences of persistent underinvestment in multilingual communication infrastructures and the systemic neglect of minority languages in public health planning.

A main challenge in communicating with vulnerable groups is ensuring language accessibility. For example, studies in Australia and the US highlighted discrepancies in the availability of Covid-19 information in languages other than English, leaving non-English speakers at a disadvantage (Pourmarzi et al., 2022; Seale et al., 2023; Tagliacozzo et al., 2021). While many European countries made Covid-19 information available in multiple languages, the materials translated into migrant languages frequently omitted key details regarding health-care entitlements and testing.(Maldonado et al., 2020; Roble et al., 2022).

Studies revealed that even when translated, the content did not always reflect the migrants' lived experiences or specific vulnerabilities (Brønholt et al., 2021; Kalocsányiová et al., 2023). As the advanced

CERC model suggested, the involvement of trusted messengers, including religious and community leaders, is highly important for successful CERC (Quinn, 2008). In the Covid-19 pandemic context, messages from trusted community leaders, such as faith leaders and community organizations, proved essential in bridging the trust gap and disseminating accurate information (Wieland et al., 2021).

In their study of Covid-19 communication in Australia, Seale et al. (2023) defined community leaders as "those who actively deliver services via migrant resource centres, refugee health services, settlement services, community-based organisations, translation services, and primary care settings" (p. 2). However, in the contemporary communication landscape, it is equally critical to recognize the role of digital information intermediaries who produce content in their audiences' native languages, different from their country of residence's official language(s). These actors constitute an emerging category of informal communicators whose significance in CERC is only beginning to be acknowledged. Although migrant experiences as recipients of public messaging are increasingly documented, a striking lack of research remains on how migrants actively participate in shaping the public health information landscape. This article addresses the experience of Russian-speaking migrants as CERC actors, which existing scholarship has underexplored. It refines understanding of the CERC framework by positioning influencers as key intermediaries of state messaging for hard-to-reach populations, highlighting the role of noninstitutional actors in crisis communication ecosystems.

2.3. SMIs' Role During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Migrants, especially those with limited proficiency in the host country's official language, relied on social media because information there was often available in their native language (Mahic et al., 2023; Matsuoka et al., 2022; Tjaden et al., 2022)—through ethnic community groups for South and Southeast Asian immigrants in Japan (Matsuoka et al., 2022), foreign news channels for Somali and Pakistani immigrants living in Oslo (Mahic et al., 2023), or influencers of Chinese descent living in the UK, Spain, or Argentina (Wang & Navarro Nicoletti, 2025). Migrants often turned to informal, community-based sources to compensate for the gaps in knowledge that native residents took for granted, such as the timing of government briefings (Brønholt et al., 2021).

Although existing research has shown that migrants often rely on social media during crises (Goldsmith et al., 2022), the mechanisms by which SMIs with migration backgrounds disseminate and contextualize governmental communication remain underexplored. This article addresses this gap by analyzing influencers as not merely commercial content creators but culturally embedded grassroots actors who bridge communicative divides.

Much existing literature frames influencers primarily as commercial actors embedded in marketing ecosystems (Abidin & Ots, 2016; Gerlich, 2022); their role as informal civic communicators during crises has received far less empirical attention. This is particularly true for migrant-centered influencer networks which operate at the intersection of cultural translation, community solidarity, and public health communication. This study builds on prior findings by examining influencers' strategies to establish credibility and adapt institutional messages to their audiences' needs—functions the CERC model traditionally attributed to journalistic actors.

Research showed that parasocial relationships (one-sided emotional connections between influencers and their followers) grew stronger during the Covid-19 pandemic, enhancing trust in the messages influencers

shared (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022). Governments and public health agencies actively engaged SMIs as part of their strategic communication to reach broader audiences (Pöyry et al., 2025), especially young people (Abidin et al., 2021; Attwell et al., 2021). Many influencers also embraced social responsibility, using their platforms to support philanthropic causes (Adinia & Hanifa, 2022; Mateus et al., 2022). Their success hinged on quickly adjusting their content while staying authentic and relatable (Leon & Mateus, 2021). Influencers adapted their messaging to address pandemic challenges by blending health guidelines with personal narratives, thus maintaining authenticity while promoting public health (Reinikainen et al., 2022).

Although it is reasonable to assume that SMIs with migration backgrounds were crucial in bridging communicative divides and offering authentic, culturally resonant narratives during the pandemic, this phenomenon has received little systematic scholarly attention (Young et al., 2025). Empirical studies rarely focus on how such actors navigate their dual position between institutional messaging and community-based trust, especially in the context of health crises (Wang & Navarro Nicoletti, 2025; Zhang & Zhao, 2020). To examine how informal communicators translate institutional crisis messaging across linguistic and cultural boundaries, this article analyzes a case study of Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds. These actors function as information intermediaries without institutional mandates, training, or accountability frameworks. By examining how these actors voluntarily assumed this role—working with open sources and addressing their audiences' needs as a "special population"—this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of the complex, bottom–up processes complementing (and sometimes compensating for) formal government communication efforts. This perspective also foregrounds the broader question of responsibility in crisis communication, highlighting the potential and limitations of relying on unpaid digital labor within marginalized communities. This informal role raises important questions about accountability, potential misalignment with governmental objectives, and SMIs' ethical ambiguity as information brokers and personal-brand curators. These dual roles suggest that influencers' mediation of public health messages may not always align with institutional interests and may, at times, privilege emotional resonance or platform visibility over consistency with expert guidance.

3. Research Questions and Methodology

3.1. Case Study

The case study builds on my long-standing engagement with Russian-speaking Instagram influencers, which I have researched since 2018. In an earlier work (Smoliarova & Bodrunova, 2021), I identified a distinctive practice of coordinated posting, in which bloggers across countries simultaneously publish posts on a shared topic using unique hashtags and cross-mentions to create a distributed conversational network. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, one influencer in Italy initiated a similar transnational campaign, inviting Russian-speaking bloggers in various countries to share updates about governmental measures in their respective locations. This emergent collaboration became the focus of the present study. As a researcher with experience studying Russian-speaking digital communities and as a member of this linguistic and cultural space, I approached this analysis with disciplinary expertise and an understanding of the sociopolitical contexts affecting these transnational audiences.

For this study, I invited participants to publish posts about the pandemic using a shared Russian-language hashtag and mention one another to amplify reach and encourage sequential reading across accounts. In this

form of coordinated posting, the SMIs published curated content simultaneously under a common thematic structure, drawing significant attention and engagement from followers. The participants further strengthened the campaign's visibility by actively commenting on one another's posts, forming a dynamic commenter network that sustained discussion and boosted algorithmic visibility.

This collaborative strategy was replicated several times using different hashtags but overlapping contributors. These coordinated efforts facilitated the transnational exchange of firsthand information about governmental Covid-19 measures across diverse geographic contexts, fostering vibrant, user-driven conversations. In total, the initiative included 113 posts authored by 58 bloggers residing in 37 countries (see Tables 1 and 2). Sampling was exhaustive within the boundaries of the campaign. I included all publicly available posts published under the coordinated hashtags (Table 1) between March 14 and April 22, 2020. No additional selection or exclusion criteria were applied because the aim was to capture the full scope of the coordinated initiative across countries and influencer types.

Table 1. Composition of the dataset.

Date in 2020	Hashtag	Number of posts
March 14	Corona_situation_in_my_country	20
March 21	Corona_situation_in_my_country_2	18
March 30	Corona_situation_in_my_country_3	16
April 4	value_life	30
April 8	Corona_situation_in_my_country_new	14
April 22	Corona_situation_update	15

Table 2. Types of influencers involved in "coordinated posting."

Type of influencers*	Number of authors	% of authors
Macro (100K–500K)	12	21
Micro (10K–100K)	39	67
Nano (<10K)	7	12
Total	58	100

Source: * Bertani (2025).

Based on this theoretical framework, this article addresses the following research questions (RQs):

> RQ1: How did Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds engage with and adapt key themes from governmental Covid-19 communication over time?
>
> RQ2: What communicative strategies did these SMIs use to construct trustworthiness and express support for governmental health directives in their posts?

3.2. Methodology

To answer RQ1, I used qualitative content analysis, examining how SMIs with migration backgrounds communicated information about Covid-19 and governmental measures during the early phase of the

pandemic. All posts were systematically coded using a predefined set of thematic categories (Table 3) derived from a prior study of governmental communication during Covid-19 (Lerouge et al., 2023). The current study's primary aim was not to produce an entirely new set of themes. Instead, it aimed to trace the presence and transformation of specific messages previously identified in governmental communication within the content produced by information intermediaries addressing hard-to-reach populations. By focusing on these established categories, the current study assessed the extent to which influencers, as informal communicators, engaged with, amplified, or recontextualized key dimensions of institutional messaging during the Covid-19 crisis. This approach aligns with the broader objective of understanding how governmental narratives circulate and are adapted in transnational, linguistically diverse digital spaces, particularly among migrant communities often excluded from formal communication infrastructures.

Table 3. Coding categories.

Category	Definition
Epidemic spreading	Mentions of the geographical diffusion and epidemiological developments of Covid-19, often including references to global case counts, cross-border spread, or escalation of the outbreak
Health situation	Descriptions of medical infrastructure challenges such as hospital overload, staff shortages, or preventive health measures to reduce transmission
Decrees and measures	Posts detailing new rules and regulations issued by national or regional authorities including quarantine orders, travel bans, or lockdown-related policies
Economic downturn	References to financial consequences of the pandemic including employment loss, business closures, economic relief programs, or fiscal policy measures
Government action	Statements about political leadership, institutional responses, or policy coordination at the local, national, or international level, often highlighting central government figures
Life-changing scenario	Narratives reflecting the social and psychological effects of the pandemic such as changes to daily routines, emotional responses to lockdowns, or broader lifestyle impacts

Two coders were involved in the analysis to ensure the coding process's reliability. During the training phase, both coders jointly coded a pilot subset of 15 posts, selected from different countries and posting waves, to ensure thematic diversity. Disagreements were discussed until conceptual consensus was reached, and the coding scheme was refined accordingly. This training aimed to calibrate their understanding of the predefined thematic categories and refine the coding scheme where necessary. Intercoder reliability was assessed during this phase using Krippendorff's alpha, and adjustments were made until a high level of agreement was achieved across all categories. For the six thematic categories, alpha values ranged from 0.77 to 0.82, indicating acceptable to high reliability (Krippendorff, 2011). Once sufficient consistency was established, the two coders coded the entire dataset independently. Regular meetings were held throughout the process to discuss ambiguous cases and ensure ongoing alignment, further strengthening the validity of the coding outcomes.

To further understand the evolution of crisis-related narratives in Russian-speaking blogs from SMIs with migration backgrounds, I examined how each thematic category changed between March 14 and April 22, 2020. The diagram (Figure 1) visualizes percentage-based distributions across six observation dates.

The "over-time" component of my analysis refers to the communicative phases of the CERC model rather than to chronological variance, as the dataset covers a short period with stable thematic composition. To answer RQ2, I explored the performative markers of reliability, the presence of informative and emotionally charged coverage, and the sources referenced by the SMIs. I used binary coding to mark whether the posts contained personal recommendations advocating for compliance with governmental health directives.

4. Results

4.1. RQ1

Analyzing social media posts by Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds revealed six major thematic categories, each reflecting different aspects of pandemic-related communication. These themes varied in prominence, indicating the influencers' shifting communicative priorities during the crisis (Table 4).

Table 4. Salience of the key themes.

Category	Number of posts	% of posts*
Decrees and measures	106	93.81
Epidemic spreading	93	82.30
Life-changing scenario	79	69.91
Government action	70	61.95
Economic downturn	40	35.40
Health situation	37	32.74

Note: * The total exceeds 100% because a single post could address multiple themes simultaneously.

The most dominant category, "decrees and measures" (93.81%, n = 106), primarily conveyed information about closures, public safety, and institutional adjustments, serving as a conduit for relaying formal directives: "Yesterday the government tightened the recommendations. No more than two people can gather together. The exception is people (family) who live together. Fine $1600+" (SMI, Australia).

The consistent and frequent appearance of this theme suggests that influencers actively circulated institutional messages, often integrating them into personalized, accessible formats. These posts align with the initial stage of the CERC model, in which governments must issue clear, authoritative instructions to reduce uncertainty (Figure 1). Influencers served as unofficial yet trusted channels who reframed these decrees in more accessible formats, helping overcome the initial noise and confusion often present in institutional messaging.

The "epidemic spreading" theme was also highly prevalent (82.30%, n = 93), particularly during the early stage of the pandemic. Posts in this category detailed the spread of the virus across geographical locations, with frequent mentions of specific regions, countries, and outbreak statistics: "Sick—2,837 people. Total tests conducted—43,498 people. Recovered—11 people. Deaths—17 people" (SMI, Czech Republic).

Contrary to comparable studies (Poirier et al., 2020) that typically showed this topic as diminishing as the pandemic became global, Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds continued to make it visible.

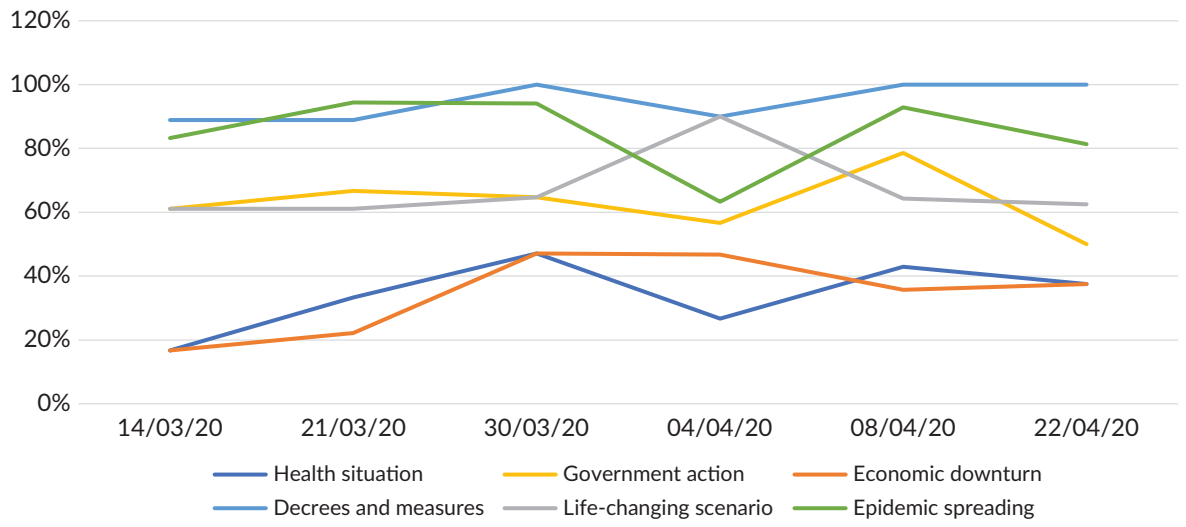


Figure 1. Temporal dynamics of the key themes.

This type of information corresponds to the CERC risk communication element, which aims to inform the public about probabilities and expected consequences. By providing real-time numbers and localized data, influencers helped enhance perceived transparency to maintain public trust during crisis escalation.

The "life-changing scenario" theme was identified in 69.91% of posts (n = 79). This category encompassed reflections on how the pandemic disrupted everyday life and altered emotional states: "The closure of mosques is what makes Egyptians sad the most, especially the fact that Muslims have been deprived of Friday prayers for the third time in their history since the adoption of Islam" (SMI, Egypt).

Influencers discussed the psychological toll of quarantine, restrictions on freedom of movement, and new routines shaped by home confinement. The narratives often carried a personal tone and contributed to normalizing the collective experience of disruption, resonating with the "societal impact" and "personal stories" categories observed in earlier research (Lee & Basnyat, 2013; Poirier et al., 2020). These narratives contributed to the CERC maintenance phase, in which governments must sustain public engagement and emotional resilience. Influencers helped normalize fear, isolation, and adaptation through personal stories, functioning as affective bridges between policy and everyday experience.

The "government action" theme (61.95%, n = 70) focused on communications involving high-level political figures and institutional responses: "A task force to combat the Covid-19 virus has been set up in Mauritius from today. It includes an immunologist and virologist, a representative from the police, from the government, etc." (SMI, Mauritius).

The progression from local to national focus in these communications likely mirrors a broader strategy to centralize public messaging in an emergency, as government authority was consolidated in crisis response efforts. This theme reflects a transition from decentralized to centralized crisis communication. Influencers' focus on high-level decision-makers mirrors the CERC emphasis on strategic coordination and visible leadership, which are crucial to sustaining message consistency as the crisis evolves.

The theme of "economic downturn" appeared in 35.40% of posts (n = 40), capturing business closures, job losses, economic aid, and general uncertainty: "Many Brazilians have been transferred to home-office work. Many have lost their jobs. Private businesses are suffering losses. The quarantine situation is unknown how long it will last, and the bills are huge and no one has cancelled them" (SMI, Brazil).

As in prior studies (e.g., Pan & Meng, 2016), the economic dimension of crisis communication proved vital in shaping public understanding of the pandemic's broader societal toll. Messages related to economic impact and support measures reflect both maintenance and resolution phases of CERC. Here, the focus shifts from immediate health threats to structural consequences, and influencers function as intermediaries helping audiences navigate complex support systems.

Finally, "health situation" was the least frequent theme, occurring in 32.74% of posts (n = 37). Posts in this category highlighted pressures on the healthcare system—hospital overcrowding and shortages of protective equipment—and promoted preventive behaviors. Although health-related content became less central than institutional and personal themes, its presence nonetheless points to influencers' roles in disseminating public health messaging, particularly through practical advice and appeals for collective responsibility. This theme relates to the persuasive aspects of risk communication. Its lower frequency suggests that influencers prioritized information directly addressing community needs, especially in transnational contexts where health systems varied widely.

Together, these thematic patterns mirror the communicative demands outlined in the CERC framework across crisis phases. Although not formally integrated into governmental strategies, influencers with migration backgrounds acted as grassroots information intermediaries, filling informational and emotional gaps for audiences otherwise underserved by institutional communication.

4.2. RQ2

The initiator, a Russian-speaking SMI from Italy, framed the endeavor on March 14, 2020, as a form of grassroots transnational reporting, stating: "The virus is spreading across all continents, so: I asked bloggers from all over the world to talk about the current situation in their countries—WHAT IS HAPPENING REALLY in the countries we live in."

This appeal highlighted the global scale of the crisis and established communicative norms around authenticity, immediacy, and professional ethos that underpinned the bloggers' strategies for cultivating trustworthiness.

A central discursive strategy across these posts was using performative markers that framed the SMIs as reliable, proximate, and nonpartisan observers. These included explicit references to first-hand experiences and real-time presence, designed to position the influencer as an eyewitness embedded in the social and political realities they describe. Typical formulations included: "First-hand information—a real-time picture" (Germany); "Today I called the hotline in Finland—everything was confirmed" (Finland); "Every day I report the statistics, developments in Italy, and public mood so you can understand that many countries are following our scenario" (Italy).

Bloggers marked a clear division between emotionally neutral reporting on public health restrictions and more affective storytelling in other parts of their posts (e.g., narratives of life-changing experiences or emotional appeals to follow health guidelines). This rhetorical boundary reinforced the impression that the information presented about government action, healthcare systems, or the spread of the virus was both factual and dispassionate. One blogger (Kuwait) noted: "I do not want to comment on any controversial issues—I just want to tell you what is really going on here."

Several others echoed this disavowal of polemics, articulating a civic duty to inform without sensationalism. A Dutch influencer expressed the need to avoid panic: "As much as I would like to, I cannot ignore this—so many inadequate assessments, and most importantly, panic."

Similarly, an Australian blogger emphasized her role as a stabilizing information source: "The purpose of my note is to tell what is happening in Australia at the moment—without whipping up panic and without hysteria. Dry facts and my personal impressions."

Such formulations highlighted both affective restraint and an ethics of care that framed trustworthiness not merely as factuality, but as emotional composure and civic responsibility. This self-positioning reflects the CERC principle that trusted messengers are often "insiders" or figures perceived as culturally proximate. Their personal histories and shared migrant background framed them discursively as information intermediaries (Seale et al., 2023), mediating between institutional narratives and community perspectives.

An analysis of references to information sources revealed that most influencers refrained from citing traditional media or governmental institutions directly, opting instead for vague references to "the news" or unsourced paraphrasing of official statements. For example, a US blogger wrote: "The news says that we are still about a month away from the peak of the disease, and hospitals are already struggling to cope."

Only one blogger (Finland) cited media outlets explicitly, mentioning the Finnish broadcasting corporation Yle and *The New York Times*, suggesting that platform conventions (e.g., the absence of hyperlinks in Instagram posts) may discourage overt citation.

Instead, the SMIs framed themselves as secondary gatekeepers who interpret and disseminate institutional information for lay audiences. This role was frequently reinforced by references to government press briefings and anticipated policy updates, often expressed in real-time idioms: "Today at 16:00 there will be a new meeting of the Czech government….I'll keep you posted" (SMI, Czech Republic).

Posts also highlighted using Instagram stories as dynamic spaces for ongoing updates and fact-checking: "I do all the updates about HOW RAPIDLY the situation is developing in our country all the time in stories" (SMI, Italy).

References to institutional actors functioned as rhetorical markers of credibility rather than measurable indicators of trust, aligning with CERC's focus on the perceived reliability of information sources. By combining official data with familiar language and personalized framing, the SMIs positioned their posts to appear aligned with formal messages while remaining accessible to their audiences.

Approximately one in five posts featured a direct appeal from bloggers to their audiences, advocating for compliance with governmental health directives during the early stages of the Covid-19 pandemic. These appeals functioned as influential acts of public alignment with official quarantine measures and were articulated across five interrelated formats. Each format reflected the bloggers' distinctive communicative strategy to frame public health guidance in relatable, persuasive, and often affective terms. These appeals reflected the CERC risk communication phase which emphasizes the importance of persuasive, actionable guidance once the initial crisis phase is underway. By framing the need to follow government instructions as morally imperative and logically sound, influencers discursively aligned themselves with institutional narratives, using emotionally charged yet relatable language to express civic responsibility.

Emotional statements represented one prominent strategy. Influencers drew on affective language to emphasize the gravity of the pandemic and the moral imperative of staying at home. These messages often cast self-isolation as a collective civic duty and reimagined quarantine as a form of solidarity rather than deprivation. One Russian-speaking influencer from Turkey expressed this vividly: "Right now, to defeat this global disease, we simply need to stay home. Just stay home—do you understand? No fighting, no trenches, just quietly staying home and doing our own thing." Similarly, a Russian-speaking Italian influencer invoked a sense of shared responsibility:

"Thanks to those providing essential services, we CAN stay home and stop the virus from spreading. For them, we MUST stay home." Such statements discursively connected institutional directives with everyday emotions and experiences, highlighting the affective dimension of compliance narratives.

Personal endorsements of health measures were also prevalent. These posts revealed bloggers' explicit support for national policies and often reinforced the necessity of the restrictions, even when they were subject to criticism. For example, an influencer from Mauritius wrote: "I fully support all the measures, even though they came late. Quarantine is absolutely necessary!" Others expressed solidarity with local governmental efforts: "I support the quarantine measures Thailand is taking to protect the country from infection. They are essential."

By positioning themselves as responsible actors aligned with state responses, influencers discursively associated their posts with the credibility and authority of official communication within diasporic and transnational contexts.

In some cases, bloggers took on a more instructive and normative tone, offering direct recommendations that mirrored public health messaging. These posts provided clear behavioral guidance framed as collective advice: "We advise everyone to stay home, take the situation seriously, wash your hands, and take care of your loved ones" (SMI, Ukraine). Here, the blogger's voice operated less as an individual opinion and more as an authoritative reiteration of institutional guidelines—although articulated in a familiar, peer-based register.

Several bloggers also relied on rational justifications, presenting adherence to quarantine as a self-evident, logical action to curb viral transmission. These messages stripped back emotional or political language in favor of scientific rationality: "There is a clear understanding of what needs to be done: Simply self-isolate to reduce the outbreak" (SMI, Turkey). This strategy aligned closely with official expert discourses and aimed to depoliticize compliance by framing it as reasoned decision-making.

Finally, personal experience sharing emerged as a subtle but effective mechanism of behavioral modeling. Bloggers described their lifestyle adjustments as soft advocacy: "I spend most of my time at home, and I strongly advise you to do the same" (SMI, United Arab Emirates). These posts humanized public health measures by integrating them into everyday life, making compliance appear manageable and socially normative within their digital communities.

Although this study focuses on transnational communicative patterns, national policy contexts and the course of the pandemic in each country shaped influencers' narratives. In Italy, where the early death toll was exceptionally high, influencers expressed particularly emotional and detailed appeals for adherence to governmental restrictions. The tone of their communication reflected collective trauma and a heightened sense of civic duty. The Egyptian blogger highlighted the closure of mosques as a way to convey the magnitude of the crisis and its profound social implications.

Influencers' capacity to encourage compliant behavior also depended on their observations of local publics. In Germany, one blogger noted that "people here are generally disciplined, no one strolls aimlessly or has picnics under the bushes." Contrarily, in Brazil, another influencer observed that "despite the ban, some shops in the favelas have reopened; people do not want to stay at home." Such contrasts reveal how national attitudes toward regulation and collective behavior informed influencer communication's tone and rhetorical stance. These examples illustrate that although the campaign operated transnationally, its discursive patterns remained deeply rooted in locally specific policy and cultural environments.

Across these formats, Russian-speaking SMIs functioned as intermediaries between state authority and the public, recontextualizing governmental health directives within accessible, affective, and culturally resonant narratives. Their endorsements helped to domesticate institutional messaging, bridging the gap between formal instruction and the social realities of their followers.

5. Discussion

In line with CERC principles stressing the need to reach "special populations" through trusted "informational mediators," this study affirms that SMIs acted as critical intermediaries in contexts in which formal communication infrastructures often failed to account for migrants' lived realities. Migrant communities are frequently positioned as "hard to reach" due to linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic barriers, and even translated governmental messages often lack cultural resonance. The influencers in our sample responded to these gaps by reframing governmental advice in ways that acknowledged their audiences' everyday concerns, thereby offering a more inclusive and context-sensitive form of communication.

The CERC model recommends collaboration with community leaders but it rarely accounts for influencers' informal, often unpaid labor. This raises critical questions about the ethics of outsourcing state responsibilities to grassroots actors. Still, many influencers voluntarily assumed this role, aligning with CERC's call for timely, credible, and empathetic messaging. Influencers enacted a form of vernacular CERC by combining emotional appeals, rational explanations, and direct advice—strategies mirroring the model's distinction between crisis (informative) and risk (persuasive) communication. Their credibility stemmed not from institutional authority but from parasocial trust, narrative authenticity, and cultural proximity. These dynamics resonate with recent literature on influencer communication (de Bérail & Bungener, 2022; Reinikainen et al., 2022).

The influencers' work also reflected strategic recontextualization, embedding abstract policies into emotionally grounded stories, daily routines, and moral appeals. They discursively mirrored the CERC's focus on combining behavioral guidance with emotional reassurance. Many influencers actively rejected misinformation and emotional manipulation, framing their content as ethical and socially responsible. These communicative choices illustrate how informal actors can amplify official messaging, especially during highly uncertain phases of a crisis.

One limitation of this study was its reliance on predefined thematic categories from Lerouge et al. (2023), rather than an inductive approach that could have revealed unexpected themes beyond institutional frameworks. Although this deductive strategy ensured comparability, it may have overlooked emergent patterns. A second limitation is the lack of attention to national variation. The study offers a transnational view of SMIs as information intermediaries but does not analyze how specific governmental strategies shaped their messaging. Future research could explore how SMI practices intersect with diverse policy contexts. Finally, the focus on social media presents two issues. First, although platforms like Instagram are accessible to many, structural inequalities exclude some migrants, limiting the reach of digital communication. Second, the study does not examine cases where influencers diverged from official narratives or spread misinformation. This warrants further investigation into the risks and contradictions of their dual roles as civic communicators and independent content creators.

The study ultimately supports a shift toward more integrated models of governmental communication whereby formal and informal actors collaboratively shape public understanding. Recognizing influencers as part of the public health communication infrastructure—particularly those with migration backgrounds—offers an opportunity to improve crisis communication in multilingual, multicultural contexts. Rather than bypassing official narratives, these actors coproduce them, embedding state advice within networks of trust, familiarity, and cultural nuance.

6. Conclusion

This article examined the communicative practices of Russian-speaking SMIs with migration backgrounds during the first wave of Covid-19. Through qualitative analysis of Instagram posts from a grassroots campaign between March and April 2020, the study shows how these influencers mediated and recontextualized governmental health messages. The findings reveal that influencers did more than circulate official information; they adapted and framed content to reflect followers' emotional and cultural contexts, including a focus on regulations and narratives around emotional impact, healthcare pressure, and economic uncertainty. Acting as informal information intermediaries, SMIs reframed institutional messages in accessible and personalized ways, according to their perceptions of the needs of audiences underserved by mainstream public health communication. Influencers constructed credibility discursively through personal testimonies, real-time updates, and references to journalistic style. This helped fill communicative gaps in contexts of low institutional trust, particularly within migrant communities. Their work represents a bottom–up model of vernacular crisis communication, offering culturally embedded alternatives when state outreach fell short.

The study highlights the value of engaging influencers rooted in marginalized communities as strategic partners in public communication. Rather than viewing them as peripheral actors, governments should

recognize their capacity to translate official discourse into culturally resonant, community-based communication forms. Future research should further explore influencers' roles in crisis communication, particularly in underrepresented language communities, and examine the ethical tensions they face at the intersection of civic, commercial, and institutional responsibilities.

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank the anonymous reviewers and the academic editors for their constructive and thoughtful feedback and for their engagement in improving the article. I also thank Dr Roman Smirnov for organizing the session at the Congress of the Swiss Sociological Association 2024, where this article was first presented and discussed.

Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

LLMs Disclosure

ChatGPT-5 was used in part for improving the grammar and style of the first version of the manuscript. All outputs were thoroughly checked, modified, and refined by the authors.

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Media and Communication
2025 • Volume 13 • Article 10462
https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.10462

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ARTICLE

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The Covid-19 Information Void: How Pro-Vaccination Voices Lost the Narrative in South Africa

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Submitted: 31 March 2025 **Accepted:** 24 July 2025 **Published:** 17 September 2025

Issue: This article is part of the issue "Government Communication on Social Media: Balancing Platforms, Propaganda, and Public Service" edited by Maud Reveilhac (LUT University) and Nic DePaula (SUNY Polytechnic Institute), fully open access at https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.i496

Abstract

The erosion of public trust in health information and government communication, particularly during crises like the Covid-19 pandemic, highlights a critical challenge in how health policies are transmitted and received. This study examines the dramatic shift in public sentiment toward Covid-19 vaccination in South Africa during 2021, a period that saw a decline from initial high acceptance to significant hesitancy. We argue that a process of social media selection allowed extreme views to proliferate as official sources retreated. Our findings suggest that sustained or increased mainstream media engagement, particularly from official sources like government and health authorities, could have mitigated the dominance of anti-vaccine narratives and have crucial implications for government communication and public health policies in the digital age. We collected and classified 482,450 original tweets about vaccination. We show that, by the end of 2021, Twitter activity was characterized by a progressive surge in anti-vaccination tweets and a decline in pro-vaccination and factual information, particularly from mainstream media. This shift mirrors the decrease in actual vaccination rates. Employing agent-based modeling, we simulated counterfactual scenarios to assess the impact of media presence on vaccine discourse. The results indicate that sustained or increased media engagement could have mitigated the dominance of anti-vaccine narratives. Conversely, a simulated media downturn led to a steeper decline in pro-vaccination content. The findings suggest that mainstream news media play a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of and support for health policies and that their disengagement creates an informational void exploited by misinformation.

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Keywords
anti-vaccine narratives; government communication; health communication; news media; social media; vaccine hesitancy; Twitter; X

1. Introduction

The 2021 Covid-19 vaccination campaign in South Africa presents a compelling case study for social and communication scientists. Initially, public sentiment indicated strong support for vaccination, with polls suggesting that up to 80% of the population was in favor (Cooper et al., 2021). However, this promising forecast took an unexpected turn. A significant decline in vaccination support occurred throughout the year, with only half of the population supporting vaccination by mid-2021 and a mere third having received the vaccine by the end of the year. This dramatic shift from widespread acceptance to hesitancy is the central puzzle of this study, and understanding its dynamics offers insights for government and public health communication strategies in the digital age. This case study provides insights into how public health organizations, government agencies, and news media outlets could leverage online platforms for timely and transparent communication to counter misinformation and promote media literacy.

To understand the dynamics of this sharp change in opinion, we examine social media platforms as a critical arena for public discourse and debate surrounding vaccination. Although public opinion and opinions on social media do not necessarily overlap (Murphy et al., 2014; Reveilhac et al., 2022), social media platforms serve as a "theatre of debates," offering a unique lens through which to observe the evolution of opinions. In doing so, the pivotal role of news media in shaping these social media debates is investigated in this research. Specifically, how news media outlets engaged with, or failed to engage with, the evolving opinions of citizens regarding vaccination is examined. By analyzing the interaction between news media and citizen opinions on social media, the aim of this research is to shed light on the factors that contributed to the dramatic shift in vaccination support in South Africa during 2021 and to understand the broader implications for public health communication and policy implementation in the digital age.

In this study, we articulate a descriptive analysis of the stance on South African Covid-19 vaccination on social media. We then incorporate counterfactual scenarios by means of agent-based modeling (ABM) to investigate the role that news media had or could have had in opposing vaccination hesitancy.

1.1. The South African Puzzle

During the Covid-19 pandemic, the primary global objective was to achieve herd immunity through extensive vaccination campaigns. Despite this unified goal, national, continental, and global surveys revealed that vaccine hesitancy and refusal posed significant obstacles to reaching this collective milestone (Cooper et al., 2021; Sallam et al., 2022). To achieve the goal of herd immunity, South Africa provided Covid-19 vaccinations to its citizens at no cost, becoming one of the first African countries to receive Covid-19 vaccines (Dzinamarira et al., 2022). Throughout 2020, vaccination acceptance rates in South Africa were very high, ranging from 68% to 82% (Cooper et al., 2021).

However, vaccination efforts faced a setback owing to the AstraZeneca/Oxford Covid-19 vaccine's low efficacy against the prevalent 501Y.V2 variant. The focus of the country then shifted to the Johnson & Johnson Covid-19 vaccine, and 80,000 doses were distributed starting on February 17, 2021 (Dzinamarira et al., 2022). This setback resulted in a progressive erosion in public trust in the vaccination program.

During the roll-out in 2021, the willingness to vaccinate within this demographic gradually decreased, falling within the 52% to 65% range (Cooper et al., 2021; Lazarus et al., 2021; Sallam et al., 2022; Wiysonge et al., 2022). According to the Ipsos survey (Cooper et al., 2021), South Africa, along with France, was among the countries with the greatest increase in vaccine hesitancy. While surveys captured this declining trend, the actual percentage of the population that became fully vaccinated was even lower than anticipated: South Africa should have vaccinated 67.25% of the population to reach herd immunity; nevertheless, only 35.47% were fully vaccinated by the end of 2021 (World Health Organization, n.d.).

Various studies have explored the reasons for Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy (Burger et al., 2021; Cooper et al., 2021; George et al., 2024; Kollamparambil et al., 2021; Lazarus et al., 2021; Sallam et al., 2022; Wand et al., 2023; Wiysonge et al., 2022). According to these studies, vaccine hesitancy has been associated with adverse safety perceptions, concerns regarding potential side effects, a lack of trust in the government and the scientific processes underpinning vaccine development, skepticism concerning vaccine efficacy, the perception of insufficient personal risk from Covid-19, misinformation and, to a lesser extent, the endorsement of conspiracy theories.

For these reasons, effective communication strategies are essential for governments to address the root causes of vaccine hesitancy (Page & Hansson, 2024) as well as to monitor and respond to emerging concerns in real time. In this context, analyzing social media platforms such as Twitter (renamed X in 2023) can offer valuable insights into public sentiment and the spatial dynamics of health-related discourse. As Ogbuokiri et al. (2022, 2025) reported, clustered social media activity may serve as an early indicator of evolving attitudes toward community-based responses to infectious diseases.

2. Literature Review

2.1. News Media and Health Policies

In the current information ecosystem, traditional news media and social media platforms constitute key arenas where people access information about local, national, and global events, as well as public guidance and policies (Love et al., 2023). Within this media landscape, governments seeking to inform and persuade citizens must navigate a highly interconnected and competitive space where news organizations, digital platforms, and user-generated content continually shape public discourse. During health crises such as the Covid-19 pandemic, this task has become even more critical: Governments are expected not only to coordinate policy and manage logistics but also to communicate in ways that are timely, transparent, and responsive to public concerns (Górska et al., 2022; Page & Hansson, 2024).

To achieve this goal, governments draw on both mainstream media and digital platforms to reach diverse segments of the population. On the one hand, traditional news outlets continue to structure the flow of information and play a critical role in conferring legitimacy, authority, and coherence to official messages

(Flaxman et al., 2016). On the other hand, governments increasingly rely on social media platforms for real-time, direct communication, enabling them to broadcast instructions, express solidarity, and respond to public concerns without the intermediation of journalists (Leong et al., 2023; Page & Hansson, 2024). These platforms not only support unmediated announcements and policy clarifications but also allow for targeted strategies that reach specific segments of the population. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the social media accounts of health ministries, political leaders, and public agencies became key sources of official information. Government posts often combined instructive content (e.g., how and where to get vaccinated) with emotional appeals aimed at fostering solidarity and trust (Page & Hansson, 2024; Vincent et al., 2023). In the Italian case, for example, Lovari (2020) showed how the Ministry of Health used Facebook to actively counter misinformation by amplifying credible influencers using hashtags, addressing fake news directly, and clarifying measures through data and visuals. Her analysis highlights that, in contexts of extreme uncertainty, strategic, transparent, and proactive communication on social media is fundamental for maintaining public trust.

This hybrid model becomes especially relevant in the context of major crises, such as the Covid-19 pandemic, when the public's demand for timely and trustworthy information intensifies, and during lockdowns, when the need to be connected is high (Wen et al., 2025). In this context, mainstream media functions as a narrative amplifier, helping frame government decisions within broader public discourses. Studies have shown that vaccine reporting in top national outlets increased substantially during the pandemic with a marked trend toward positive framing despite occasional mentions of side effects (Christensen et al., 2022). Outlets such as *The New York Times* focused on vaccine efficacy and public safety, contributing to a discourse of civic responsibility and national effort (Wen et al., 2025). Such coverage reinforced governmental messages, especially among segments of the population that rely on mainstream media for information validation and coherence. In line with this, studies indicate that individuals who consume news through traditional media, such as national or local newspapers, are more likely to express trust in vaccines than are those who rely primarily on social media (Piltch-Loeb et al., 2021).

Importantly, news media remain central even within digital environments. Rather than being displaced by social media, mainstream outlets have extended their reach by adapting to platforms and sharing content across channels such as X, Facebook, and YouTube. For example, a substantial portion of the most-viewed YouTube videos about Covid-19 vaccination were produced by established news organizations (Basch et al., 2020) and news shared on social platforms continues to shape public discourse and guide informational attention (Turcotte et al., 2015; Walker & Matsa, 2021). South Africa is no exception to this trend: Survey data show a sharp increase in news consumption via social media during the pandemic (Conroy-Krutz et al., 2024).

Beyond their function as communication channels, mainstream media have been shown to exert measurable effects on public attitudes and behaviors related to health. A growing body of research highlights how exposure to news content can shape risk perception, encourage preventive actions, and promote prosocial responses to public health messages. For instance, Brannstrom and Lindblad (1994) demonstrated that media coverage focused on health topics can prompt individuals to reconsider their lifestyle choices. Similarly, Wakefield et al. (2010) reported that health campaigns are more effective when the information is perceived as personally relevant. Clear language, visuals, and reliable sources have also been identified as key factors in boosting public engagement with health messaging (Nickl et al., 2024).

In addition to informing, the media can also model and encourage prosocial behavior. Constructive journalism, which emphasizes positive perspectives and solutions to social problems, has been linked to greater empathy and civic engagement (Mast et al., 2019; McIntyre & Gyldensted, 2018). Drawing on Fredrickson's (2001) positive psychology theory, van Venrooij et al. (2022) argued that positive news content can broaden cognitive and emotional repertoires, fostering behavioral change. Supporting evidence spans media formats from television (Mares & Woodard, 2005) and video games (Greitemeyer & Osswald, 2010) to music (Greitemeyer, 2009; Jacob et al., 2010).

People also actively seek information in response to salient health events, which can spark immediate behavioral responses. For example, Angelina Jolie discussed her health, resulting in a temporary spike in online searches related to genetics and breast cancer treatment, which quickly returned to baseline levels (Bhatti & Redelmeier, 2015). Similarly, the media coverage of Kylie Minogue's early breast cancer diagnosis led to a substantial increase in mammogram appointments, exemplifying how media can drive proactive health behaviors when framing health policies in a way that draws public attention (Chapman et al., 2005). Research on the relationship between news media and traffic accidents in Spain (Lucas et al., 2024) also revealed a correlation between increased news coverage of road safety and a reduction in traffic accidents, suggesting that information campaigns through the media can contribute to safer behaviors.

Finally, mainstream news media can contribute to public health policy by shaping the agenda and framing issues. By prioritizing certain health topics, news media help elevate them within public discourse and policy-making processes. Martinson and Hindman's (2005) study of coverage during a breast cancer screening campaign revealed a positive association between intervention efforts and local newspaper content, suggesting the media's role in building a health promotion agenda. In particular, localized news has been shown to be relevant to audiences, providing information about community-specific health resources and initiatives, thereby increasing engagement and potentially driving changes to behavior (Young et al., 2015). By highlighting contextual information and the societal factors contributing to health problems, the media can move the narrative beyond individual responsibility toward the need for collective action and policy interventions.

2.2. Social Media, Disinformation, and News

As we have already emphasized, with the introduction of social media news, consumption patterns have changed and people engage with news via social media. Although this has led people to access more news daily, it also has several downsides, notably the rapid and widespread dissemination of misinformation. This phenomenon became particularly evident during the Covid-19 pandemic, leading the World Health Organization (2020) to describe it as an "infodemic"—a flood of information, both accurate and false—that makes it difficult for people to find trustworthy sources and reliable guidance.

The spread of misinformation on social media was not only massive but also highly consequential, shaping public perceptions, influencing health behaviors, and eroding public trust in governments and scientific institutions (Cáceres et al., 2022; Cinelli et al., 2020). Research has indicated that misinformation constituted 0.2% to 28.8% of social media posts during this period (Gabarron et al., 2021). The rapid dissemination of false or misleading information not only led to public confusion and the erosion of trust in institutions but also hindered an efficient response to the emergency (Gisondi et al., 2022).

The inherent characteristics of social media platforms make them fertile ground for the spread of misinformation (Cinelli et al., 2020; Mahlous, 2024). During the pandemic, the volume of Covid-19-related content on social media was immense, with one tracking program reporting over 40 million mentions in a single week (Gottlieb & Dyer, 2020). This sheer volume of information circulating on these platforms makes it incredibly difficult for users to discern factual and pertinent content from fake news. The ease with which users share content with their networks, often without critically evaluating its source or veracity, results in information spreading globally in a matter of seconds. In addition, the proliferation of information sources, including nonprofessional news actors, makes it difficult for mainstream media outlets to make their brands visible and distinguishable (Kalogeropoulos et al., 2019). This blurring of the lines between credible journalism and unverified claims significantly contributes to the dissemination of misinformation.

Furthermore, algorithms that provide users with content are designed to maximize user engagement and are likely to prioritize sensational or emotionally charged content which often includes misinformation (Kordzadeh & Ghasemaghaei, 2022). By repeatedly presenting certain content to users with specific profiles or search histories, algorithms can create echo chambers where individuals are primarily exposed to information confirming their existing beliefs, regardless of its accuracy. This can lead to a situation where users are "cloister[ed] from reports on legitimate scientific evidence" (Gisondi et al., 2022, p. 4).

In contrast, mainstream media have the potential to debunk misinformation and promote scientific knowledge. By producing high-quality, fact-checked news reports and making them readily accessible across various platforms including social media, news outlets can counter the spread of misinformation. A key aspect of this role is the ability of journalists to verify sources, contrast false narratives, and present accurate information that aligns with journalistic ethics (Roem & Vanisya, 2024). By upholding these standards, fact-checked news reports contribute to a more informed public debate and support health policies, as exemplified by the aforementioned research (e.g., Christensen et al., 2022; Mahlous, 2024; Martinson & Hindman, 2005; Wakefield et al., 2010; Wen et al., 2025).

However, recent decades have witnessed a deterioration of news quality by professional media (Craig, 2010; Salaverría, 2005). The need to maintain competitiveness in a landscape characterized by time pressure and staff shortages, on the one hand, and growing commercialization and economic challenges, on the other hand, have compromised the quality of journalistic standards, leading to increased shallowness, inaccuracy, or even misinformation (Bogart, 2017; Urban & Schweiger, 2014).

In addition, the overwhelming volume of (dis)information circulating on social media, especially during the Covid-19 pandemic, has made it increasingly difficult for voices to be heard as they are often drowned out by the constant stream of messages. This challenge affects not only social groups and marginalized communities striving for visibility but also governmental organizations. Tufekci (2017) characterized this dynamic as a form of cyber warfare in which the battlefield is virtual rather than physical, yet remains strategically significant. Given the crucial role that mainstream media can play in countering misinformation and supporting effective health policies, their strong presence on social media becomes particularly vital during times of crisis.

Therefore, it is essential for public health organizations, government agencies, and news media outlets to actively engage in the online ecosystem, provide accurate information, and counter misinformation. News organizations can play a vital role in enhancing social media users' news and health literacy as people trust

them and rely on them for information (Chen et al., 2020; Migliorini et al., 2023; Sundani & Motloutsi, 2021). This can be achieved through educational content that explains how to identify reliable sources, recognize common misinformation tactics, and critically evaluate information encountered online before sharing it.

In the case of South Africa, the Covid-19 vaccination campaign started to falter just as pro-vaccination messages in the mainstream media began to fade, gradually becoming submerged in a sea of competing narratives, many of which promoted anti-vaccine positions. In this study, we leverage computational methods to investigate the Twitter landscape during the campaign. We attempt to answer the questions of what happened and whether some measures could have been taken to counteract vaccine hesitancy. In this study, we focus exclusively on news media presence, without examining the content and style of communication. We hypothesize that, beyond the quality of information, its sustained presence and visibility also play a key role in the communication of governmental policies. We expect to find a decline in the presence of mainstream outlets that favored anti-vaccination positions. We also expect this to be related to the fading out of pro-vaccination stances. Thus, we apply ABM to investigate alternative scenarios in which the connection between news outlets and pro-vaccination attitudes might have been tighter and in which the media response might have taken alternative paths.

3. Methods

3.1. Data Acquisition

At the beginning of 2021 in South Africa, social media was used by 41.9% of the population, 60% of whom were between 18 and 35 years old (We are social & Hootsuite, 2021). Twitter was the fifth most common form of social media with a penetration rate of 59.2%. We extracted 482,450 unique original tweets from the Twitter API for all of 2021 by the following vaccine-related keywords: vaccine, vaccination, vax, anti-vax, anti-vaccination, anti-vaccine, antivax, vaxed, vaxxed, unvaxed, unvaxxed, and vaccinated. While the precise number of all relevant tweets remains unknown, this sample focuses on tweets with clear, discernible messages. It enables us to approximate the information a user seeking vaccine-related data on Twitter would likely encounter. Therefore, we are confident that this sample is sufficiently large to discern meaningful trends. To ensure that the tweets were related to South Africa, these keywords were paired with geographic taggers (see Annex 1 in the Supplementary File for the detailed procedure). While this procedure might misattribute some tweets, it mitigates bias contained in relying only on tweets with explicit geographical information (Sloan & Morgan, 2015). The tweets were then divided into four phases that described the evolution of the Covid-19 vaccination campaign:

- Phase 1 (n = 113,552) ranged from 01/02/2021 to 20/02/2021. It corresponds with the launch of the vaccination campaign.
- Phase 2 (n = 91,292) spanned from 21/02/2021 to 20/06/2021, capturing the period in which the vaccination campaign targeted primarily front-line health care workers and individuals aged 60 and above. A total of 2,131,210 people were vaccinated during this period (Mahdi et al., 2021).
- Phase 3 (n = 172,503) ranged from 21/06/2021 to 23/11/2021. It captures the period in which the vaccination campaign was extended to the remaining age groups and professional categories (people vaccinated = 14,639,740), although the Delta variant led to renewed lockdown measures (Mahdi et al., 2021).

- Phase 4 (n = 105,103) spanned from 24/11/2021 until 30/12/2021, representing the moment of failure of the campaign. The Omicron variant was discovered and confirmed cases spiked again. The vaccination campaign slowed with only 2,124,344 newly vaccinated individuals (Mahdi et al., 2021).

The news media tweets were classified using a hand-curated list of 356 news outlets and journalists' handles. Then we applied machine learning to classify the stance of the tweets. First, we manually curated a list of all the mainstream news media and journalist handles in the corpus. A total of 10,717 vaccine-related tweets were emitted by news media sources in 2021. We ran in-depth content analysis on a random sample of 150 tweets per phase to estimate the categories present in the corpus (Kerr et al., 2024). Tweets were initially classified as pro-vaccination, anti-vaccination, factual information, or unclear classification. A corpus of 1,500 tweets per phase was assembled (N = 6,000) and each tweet was categorized by three judges. The final classification was based on the agreement of at least two judges. We generated Word2Vec word embedding on the full corpus and trained a support vector machine (SVM) model to assess the stance of the remaining tweets. SVM models classify data by finding an "optimal line" that maximizes the distance between different categories in a multidimensional space. They are particularly effective and robust for classifying high-dimensional, outlier-prone data, such as text. The SVM model achieved an accuracy of 0.76 (precision: 0.78, recall: 0.76, F1 score: 0.76; see Annex 2 in the Supplementary File for details). As validation of the SVM results, 93% of our hand-curated news media tweets were classified as factual, 5.7% as pro-vax, 1% as uncertain, and 0.3% as anti-vax by the machine. This method has been used in other studies, yielding similar results (Wu et al., 2025).

We analyzed the distribution of the five categories (Provaxxer, Antivaxxer, Factual text, Unclear, and News) in each phase to provide an overview of the progression of the opinions over the year and the role of the news media. Because we were interested not only in describing what happened during the campaign but also in exploring what would have happened if circumstances were different, we simulated a series of scenarios using ABM via the ABM package for R (Ma, 2025) to investigate whether increasing or decreasing news media communication could have changed the proliferation of anti-vaccination stances. ABM is a computational method for understanding the behavior of a system as a whole that relies on simulating the interactions of autonomous agents within a specific time window (Axelrod, 1997). In the simulated system, each agent operates under a defined set of rules governing its interactions with other agents, allowing researchers to observe how the system evolves as these rules are applied. The ABM is particularly useful for studying complex adaptive systems where the overall system behavior is difficult to predict from the behavior of its individual components. This allows researchers to explore counterfactual scenarios by modifying agent behaviors and environmental parameters.

In our model, each agent represents a tweet (or a user tweeting once) in each phase. We used the empirical probabilities of switching categories between Phases 3 and 4 to set the rule at which agents would change their stance. To assess the influence of news media, we posited that an agent would change to a pro-vaccination opinion if it came into contact with news tweets. We investigated two sets of scenarios: one with a 25% probability that this agent would change its opinion and one in which the probability was very high, set to 75%. These values were chosen not as exact empirical measures, but as representative of "moderate" and "high" levels of media influence to test the model's sensitivity to a significant change in media presence. While these parameters are arbitrary and there is no study that indicates which would be a suitable threshold, they illustrate how the system could change when varying the influence of media on

opinions. Therefore, we modeled four scenarios exploring media presence on Twitter: the first reflecting the actual distribution of tweets; the second, in which news completely disappears from the Twittersphere; the third, in which news media presence remains constant over time; and the fourth, in which the volume of news tweets increases.

4. Results

4.1. Transition Between Phases

Figure 1 illustrates the distribution of tweets across different categories and the four phases of the campaign. Each bar represents a category classified in each time phase. The lines flowing between phases represent the number of tweets generated by the same users across those phases. The portions of the bars that do not originate from the previous phase indicate tweets from new users who did not engage in the prior phase.

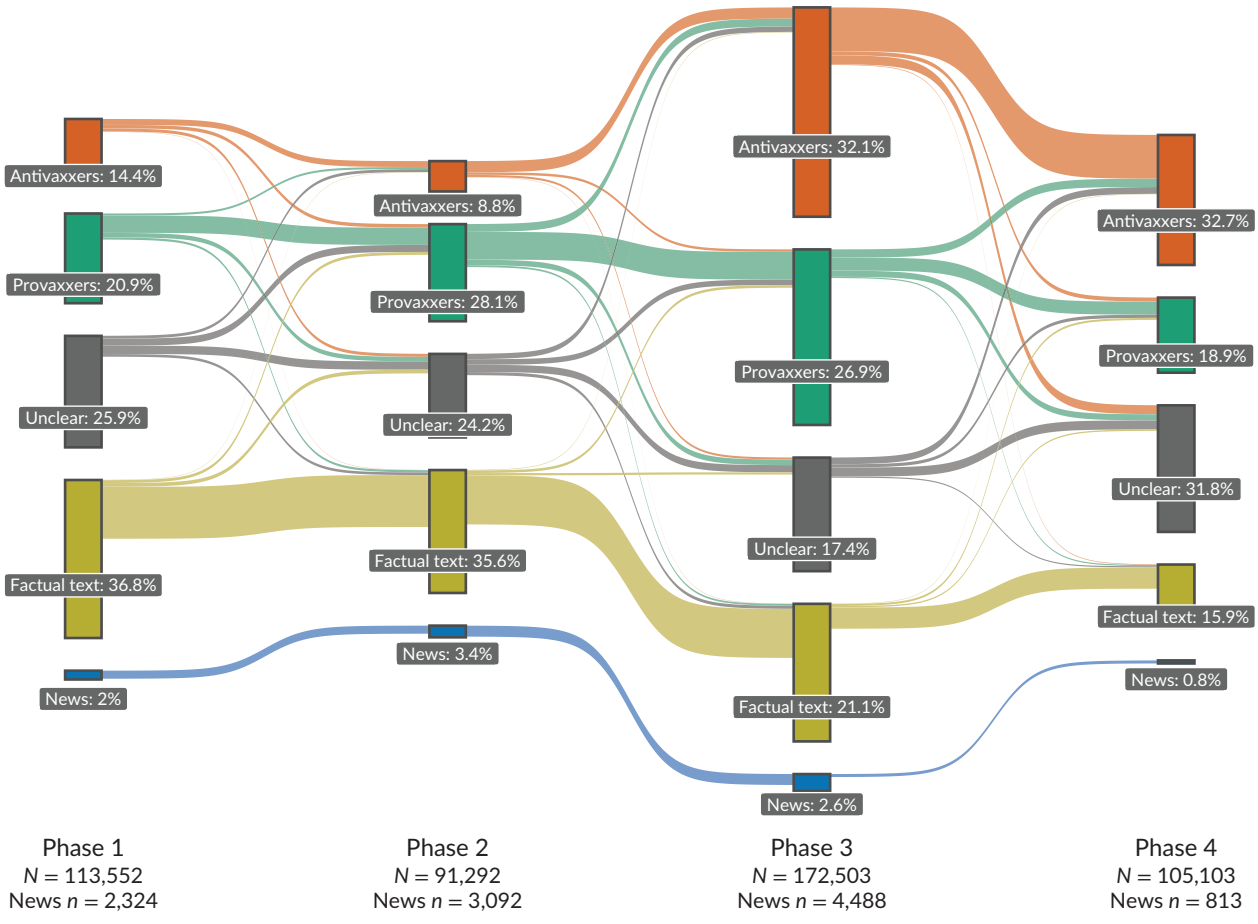


Figure 1. Sankey diagram of transitions between vaccine-related stances across the four phase.

In line with surveys showing support for the vaccine at the beginning of the campaign, the plot shows that anti-vaccination positions were relatively rare during the first two phases. The phases were characterized mainly by the presence of factual texts. The news flow was also consistent, with a steady increase in media tweets from Phase 1 to Phase 3.

The number of anti-vaccination tweets massively increased in the third phase when the government extended the vaccine program to all citizens. However, the number of anti-vaccination and pro-vaccination tweets was fairly similar, with neither position dominating the other. This was not the case in Phase 4. The number of clearly identified pro-vaccination tweets decreased and the number of anti-vaccination tweets became dominant. Notably, the proportion of unclear messages also slightly increased, indicating that distinguishing between overtly anti-vaccination and pro-vaccination discourses was more difficult for the model. Nevertheless, a relatively high portion of antivaxxers from Phase 3 continued to engage in Phase 4, unlike provaxxers.

In line with our hypotheses, the number of mainstream media tweets decreased significantly in Phase 4. Similarly, the factual tweets also declined. This finding indicates that the vaccine discourse on Twitter shifted toward being dominated by opinion-based tweets while factual information became less prevalent. It also suggests a reduced effort from news outlets to disseminate factual information and a corresponding decrease in the sharing of objective data regarding vaccines. Consequently, the online conversation surrounding vaccination became increasingly polarized, with personal opinions and anecdotal evidence taking precedence over verified facts and expert pronouncements.

4.2. Simulation of Media Influence

From the previous analyses, a question arises: What would have occurred had the media not ceased its efforts to promote pro-vaccine information? To address this, we ran a series of agent-based models on the basis of the real-world scenario of changes in the distributions of our five categories between Phases 3 and 4.

We constructed a transition matrix which illustrates the probability distribution of each Phase 3 stance in the subsequent phase. We then simulate the influence of the media by assigning a 25% probability of an agent shifting to a pro-vaccine stance upon interaction with a news outlet. The interaction probability, that is, the probability that an agent would interact with a news tweet, was assessed using a random network with a degree of six, mirroring the average user distance in Phase 4 of our data (Morselli & Beramendi, 2025). Lacking further insight into why other users might have changed their stance, agents were instructed to transition between categories in accordance with our transition matrix. In other words, we did not instruct the model to change according to specific rules but rather to reflect the empirical probability distribution. We conducted the simulations across five time points, where time zero represented the empirical distribution at Phase 3, and each subsequent interval mirrored the change observed between Phases 3 and 4. The following time points approximate what would happen over the following year (i.e., four periods). The simulations were repeated 500 times to obtain more accurate estimates.

We modelled four different scenarios. To assess whether media would have prevented the imbalance in the presence of anti-vaccine tweets, we calculated the difference between anti-vaccination and pro-vaccination distributions using the trapezoidal rule. Smaller differences indicate a less dominant distribution of one of the two positions. Table 1 reports the average difference between the distributions of the simulated pro-vaccination and anti-vaccination effects across the 500 replications for all the scenarios and their 95% confidence intervals.

Table 1. Area difference between anti-vaccination and pro-vaccination simulated distributions.

Scenario	News influence probability = 25%				News influence probability = 75%			
			95% Confidence interval				95% Confidence interval	
	Mean	*SD*	Lower bound	Upper bound	Mean	*SD*	Lower bound	Upper bound
1	17,867.54	366.43	17,116.11	18,520.79	13,471.98	341.48	12,895.63	14,190.06
2	21,108.18	363.63	20,443.05	21,886.81	20,474.88	381.00	19,769.35	21,202.88
3	14,849.11	352.58	14,160.56	15,601.50	8,474.93	385.59	7,743.41	9,314.51
4	13,607.97	358.55	12,898.76	14,281.10	5,957.49	263.11	5,469.89	6,456.08

Notes: The area is calculated with the trapezoidal rule for each ABM replica; the reported statistics refer to the mean, standard deviation (*SD*), and confidence interval over 100 replicas for each scenario.

Scenario 1 (Figure 2, S1) is our baseline model. It captures the transition between Phases 3 and 4 and simulates the evolution of the category distribution across time, with news media dropping out at the empirical rate. In other words, this scenario assumes that news tweets declined at the same rate as they did between Phases 3 and 4. Once the initial distribution and the dropout rates were set, the model was allowed to freely evolve following the programmed interaction rules. Because the rate of decrease of the news was set to the real parameters, we would expect that after the first step (Time 1), the ABM would reproduce the real distribution in Phase 4. Consistent with this hypothesis, and validating our model, the results mirror the dropout rate with reasonably good accuracy, predicting that the tweets would be distributed as Antivaxxer = 12,585, Provaxxer = 8,795, Unclear = 6,088, Factual text = 6,850, News = 887, and Dropout = 137,298 (tweets that were generated in Phase 3 but had no corresponding tweets in Phase 4, meaning the users who created them stopped tweeting about vaccines), compared to the real distribution in Phase 4 of Antivaxxer = 15,608, Provaxxer = 5,855, Unclear = 6,714, Factual text = 6,374, News = 795, and Dropout = 137,157. Interestingly, the model could not exactly estimate the decline in pro-vaccination tweets, even after several parameters were changed. By reproducing the decline observed between Phases 3 and 4, our model mirrors a progressive lack of interest in the vaccination debate over time, confirming the validity of the interaction rules we assigned to the model.

In Scenario 2 (Figure 2, S2), we simulate the sudden drop of tweeting activity by mainstream media, shifting from 4,488 tweets to zero. This ABM shows what would have happened, given our interaction rules, if the news media had disappeared completely from Twitter. In this scenario, the decrease in the rate of pro-vaccination tweets is steeper than that in the previous scenario. The area between the anti-vaccination and pro-vaccination distribution lines increased to 21,108, compared with 17,867 in Scenario 1. This shows that, assuming the minimal influence of mainstream media in promoting pro-vaccine opinions, stopping nudges for pro-vaccine information could have created even more space for anti-vaccine tweeting activity.

To corroborate this hypothesis, we investigated what would have happened if the media presence had remained the same as in Phase 3 (Scenario 3, Figure 2, S3) or even had increased its activity (Scenario 4, Figure 2, S4). Although neither scenario completely contrasted the predominance of anti-vaccine positions, the difference between pro- and anti-vaccine opinions was reduced in both scenarios with the difference between the two positions in Scenario 4 declining by one-fourth compared with that in Scenario 1.

To further expand this investigation, Table 1 also reports the simulations with an influence of 75% of the news on pro-vaccine opinions. This set of simulations assumes that users following mainstream media will convert to pro-vaccine opinions three out of four times. Although this is a completely unrealistic scenario, the simulation shows that, in that case, the difference between pro- and anti-vaccination tweets in Scenario 4 would have been reduced by 60% compared with that in Scenario 1, highlighting the potential role of the media in promoting vaccination willingness.

Finally, it could be argued that the decline of the pro-vaccination group might depend on the size difference between the two groups. In that case, the results would be seriously affected by the misclassification errors of the SVM model. To investigate this issue, we ran a sensitivity analysis by setting the size of the two opinion groups to be equal to the empirical size of the anti-vaccination group in Phase 3. The results reported in Table 2 show a similar trend to those in Table 1, confirming that the difference between the two groups is reduced by a constant presence of news tweets, if news have an influence on opinions.

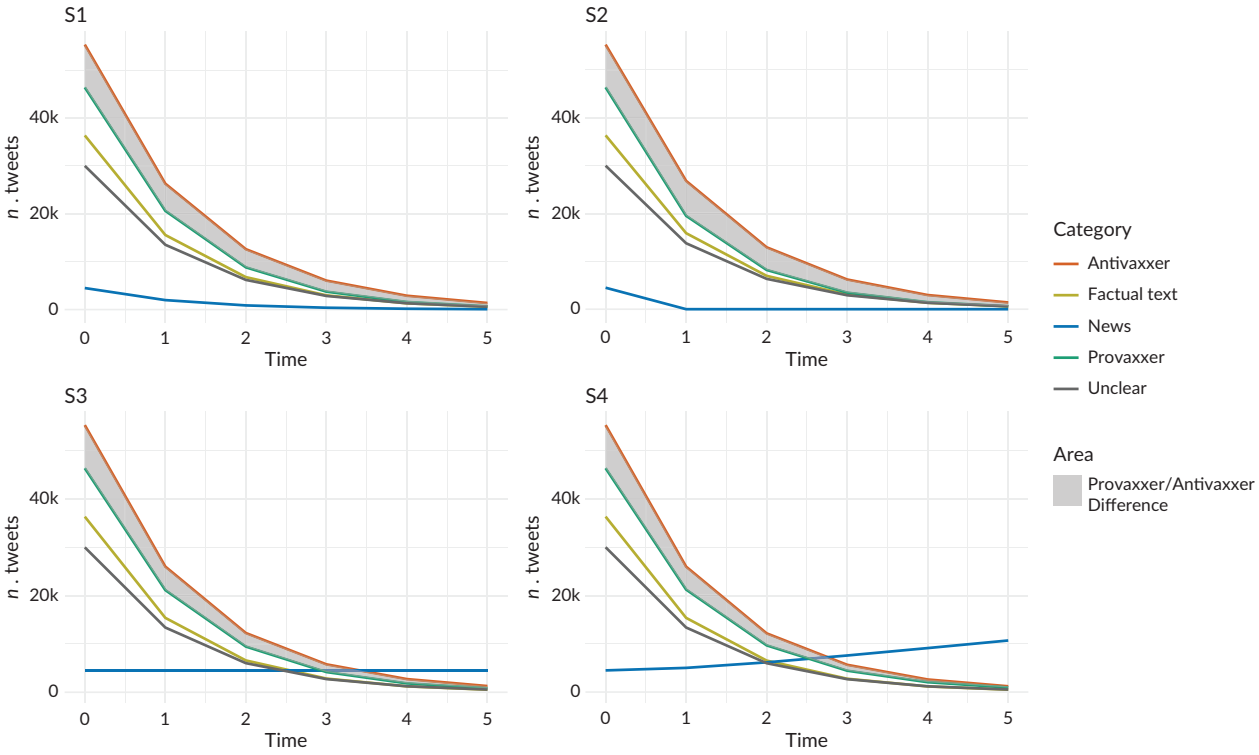


Figure 2. Distribution of stance categories as predicted by the agent-based model with news influence at 25%: S1 is the baseline; S2 is news tweets decrease; S3 is news tweets stabilize; and S4 is news tweets increase. Notes: The y-axis represents the number of tweets, and the x-axis represents the passage of time; time = 0 reports the empirical distributions of tweets in Phase 3 and it is the same in all four scenarios; time >0 displays the change of tweets as simulated by the ABM.

Table 2. Sensitivity analysis: Difference between anti-vaccination and pro-vaccination tweets distribution, setting initial tweets production to be equal.

Scenario	News influence probability = 25%				News influence probability = 75%			
			95% Confidence interval				95% Confidence interval	
	Mean	*SD*	Lower bound	Upper bound	Mean	*SD*	Lower bound	Upper bound
1	8,281.57	361.89	7,677.08	8,866.35	4279.00	305.04	3869.80	4816.10
2	11,396.12	381.26	10,804.55	12,015.53	10871.77	420.42	10218.48	11524.15
3	5,398.11	402.85	4,815.03	6,067.28	2983.59	218.90	2692.45	3374.45
4	4,155.10	359.80	3,575.40	4,771.23	3441.82	369.55	2857.55	4074.45

Notes: Anti-vaccination and pro-vaccination tweets at time = 0–n = 55,299 (number of the anti-vaccination tweets in Phase 3).

5. Discussion

The aim of this study was to investigate the role of social media opinions and mainstream outlets in shaping Covid-19 vaccine hesitancy in South Africa. Our analysis of the tweet distribution across the four defined phases of the vaccination campaign revealed a picture mirroring the passage from vaccination willingness to hesitancy reported in public opinion surveys and vaccination data. The early phases, characterized by strong initial support for vaccination, were dominated by factual information and a relatively low presence of anti-vaccine sentiment. The steady increase in mainstream media tweets during this period indicated a concerted effort to disseminate accurate information and promote vaccine uptake. However, this landscape shifted dramatically as the campaign progressed. The third phase witnessed a surge in anti-vaccine tweets, coinciding with the expansion of vaccine eligibility to the general population. This shift signaled a growing polarization of opinions and a significant challenge to the vaccination program. The final phase, marked by the emergence of the Omicron variant and a slowdown in vaccination rates, further solidified this trend. Anti-vaccine voices became dominant, whereas the presence of pro-vaccine and factual/news tweets dwindled.

A particularly noteworthy finding is the stark decline in news media tweets during between the phase of mass vaccination (Phase 3) and the following, suggesting a potential withdrawal of mainstream media from the vaccine debate on social media. While our analysis does not allow us to determine the exact reasons for this decline, it is plausible that vaccination was no longer considered "newsworthy" and thus faded from online discourse. Studies have shown that exposure to news content from traditional outlets is associated with greater vaccine acceptance (Piltch-Loeb et al., 2021) and that mainstream media played a central role during the pandemic by amplifying pro-vaccine messages, emphasizing efficacy, and promoting a sense of civic duty (Christensen et al., 2022; Wen et al., 2025). The retreat of mainstream media from vaccine coverage may have left an informational void—particularly among users who rely on these outlets for validating facts and making health decisions—subsequently filled by misinformation and anti-vaccine narratives.

This void is particularly significant given that individuals with different vaccination stances rely on distinct sources of information. Pro-vaccine users typically consume news from mainstream media, which supports vaccination efforts, whereas anti-vaccine users often turn to alternative sources that propagate misinformation or conspiracy narratives (Mønsted & Lehmann, 2022). A decline in mainstream news

coverage may reduce the number of governmental messages and pro-vaccine content available, limiting the informational resources that reinforce support for vaccination.

However, the impact of this shift extends beyond the direct availability of information. Research suggests that social media users primarily consume news articles that are shared within their networks (Messing & Westwood, 2013). This means that when mainstream news outlets reduce their coverage of vaccination, it not only lowers the overall presence of pro-vaccine discourse but also alters the informational ecosystem by limiting the circulation of such content within online networks. As a result, vaccine-hesitant individuals may be increasingly exposed to anti-vaccine narratives, which continue to be actively shared while encountering fewer pro-vaccine perspectives. This shift in available content can contribute to changes in individual attitudes over time, reinforcing skepticism and reducing confidence in vaccination.

Finally, the structure of online communities further amplifies this effect. Smaller, tightly knit communities, such as anti-vaccine groups, tend to be more cohesive and active in disseminating their narratives (Barberá, 2020; Barberá & Rivero, 2014; Mønsted & Lehmann, 2022; Shore et al., 2016). This structural advantage enables them to dominate discussions when mainstream media disengages.

Our ABM reinforces this interpretation by demonstrating how shifts in media engagement influence the balance of the vaccine discourses on social media. Through various counterfactual scenarios, we illustrate the extent to which sustained media presence could have mitigated the dominance of anti-vaccine narratives. In Scenario 2, where we simulated a complete drop-off of news media activity, the decline in pro-vaccine content was steeper than that in the baseline scenario, emphasizing the media's role in bolstering pro-vaccine voices. Conversely, Scenarios 3 and 4, which simulated sustained or increased media engagement, demonstrated a clear mitigation of anti-vaccine dominance. These simulations suggest that an active and sustained media presence could have altered, although not entirely countered, the spread of anti-vaccine sentiment on Twitter and potentially influenced real-world vaccination rates.

This finding highlights the competitive nature of discourse on social media where dominant and counterdominant discourses continuously contest visibility and influence. Social media platforms enable actors with varying levels of power to engage in open and visible debate, creating a dynamic ecosystem in which the decline of one narrative can lead to the increased prominence of another (Pepe-Oliva & Casero-Ripollés, 2023). The absence of mainstream media coverage not only reduced the circulation of pro-vaccine discourse but also reshaped the structure of online discussions, reinforcing the dominance of alternative, anti-vaccine narratives.

A key factor in this shift is the role of highly cohesive, tightly knit communities that sustain minority discourses. Research suggests that small but highly engaged groups can exert disproportionate influence by continually sharing and amplifying their messages (Barberá & Rivero, 2014; Mønsted & Lehmann, 2022). Unlike pro-vaccine discourse, largely dependent on institutional voices and mainstream media, anti-vaccine narratives are driven primarily by decentralized networks of committed users. The persistence of these groups allows them to maintain a strong presence even when pro-vaccine discourse declines, giving the impression of a larger and more widespread opposition to vaccination than actually exists (Shore et al., 2016).

Our findings underscore the critical need for public health organizations and government agencies to maintain a proactive and sustained presence in the online information ecosystem. We have shown that such a presence would guarantee, or at least contrast, the negative effects of the informational void created by the lack of government communication via mainstream and social media. Our findings align with research demonstrating that exposure to misinformation significantly reduces the likelihood of vaccination (Cinelli et al., 2021; Gkinopoulos et al., 2022; Wilson & Wiysonge, 2020). In South Africa, vaccine hesitancy is highest among individuals who place greater trust in social media as an information source than among those who do not rely on these platforms (Burger et al., 2021; Sundani & Motloutsi, 2021). This suggests that social media is not merely a medium for discourse but also an active agent that shapes public perceptions of vaccine safety and necessity.

In addition to previous research, we have shown that the persistent presence of accurate information could actively counter misinformation. In our case study, while misinformation spread rapidly, efforts to counter it were uneven. As Burger et al. (2021) highlighted, government initiatives in South Africa have focused primarily on raising awareness of Covid-19 symptoms and preventive measures with far less emphasis on debunking vaccine-related misinformation. In contrast, other national contexts have demonstrated more strategic and diversified approaches to social media communication. Comparative research has emphasized that the effectiveness of governmental communication can be strengthened by combining instructive content, such as clear directives, with expressive messages that foster solidarity and empathy (Leong et al., 2023; Page & Hansson, 2024). Such diversified strategies may help increase public receptivity and mitigate resistance, particularly in contexts where trust in institutions is limited.

6. Limitations and Future Directions

This study also acknowledges certain limitations. First, the use of tweets strongly limits the exploration of sociodemographic variables, as metadata, such as gender, age, and specific region are missing. However, we know that Twitter users are not a random sample of the South African population. We also know that males and young people are less willing to be vaccinated in South Africa (Cooper, 2021). However, considering the nature of our data, individual-level analyses are very limited and probably faulty. For this reason, we adopted a systemic approach by focusing on macro-level dynamics. Our results should not be interpreted as representative of the public opinion dynamics in South Africa; instead, they highlight how the vaccination debate unfolded during that period and provide a quite clear picture of what a random user would have encountered if accessing Twitter and searching for information on the Covid-19 vaccine.

In addition, the categorization of tweets via machine learning, while rigorously conducted, might miss or misinterpret some of the nuances that are expressed in the texts. Although our manual validation suggests the overall reliability of the classification, some errors are undoubtedly present. Furthermore, it could be argued that at least part of the decline in pro-vaccination tweets might be explained by the increase in unclear tweets in Phase 4. While this aspect cannot be completely excluded, it also highlights another important fact. In the final phase, categorizing tweets as either supporting or opposing vaccinations was more difficult for the SVM algorithm. Because the SVM classification relies on the clarity and distinctness of the input, in this case language, this analysis shows that pro- and anti-vaccination language became more entangled during this period. In other words, if the SVM algorithm misclassified pro-vaccination messages, their content was not as clear an indication of stance, contributing to the lack of a clear contrast to the

anti-vaccination narrative. Namely, the SVM algorithm acts as a naive internet user searching for information on the vaccine and needing to understand the position expressed in the tweets that were found. Further studies should delve into the topics treated in the tweets, not only their overall stance but also their individual motivations for tweeting or interacting with other users.

In this study, we used ABM to explore counterfactual scenarios to corroborate our hypotheses. While providing valuable insights, ABM is a simplification of a complex real-world scenario. In this article, we assumed a relatively arbitrary and optimistic view of the influence that the media can have on opinions. Alternative parameters and interaction rules could be specified to simulate the influence between media and agents (e.g., Axelrod, 1997; Hu & Zhu, 2017). Each of these parameters relies on a set of assumptions about how agents interact. We chose to minimize these assumptions and to tune our model on real data. The distribution of stances in our baseline model after the first step, mirroring the empirical data, validates our procedure. However, we cannot truly know the probability that news media can influence an individual's position. It can depend on many different factors and varies among individuals. Our goal was only to explore a series of scenarios to answer the question of whether news media could have made a difference in the online debate on Covid-19 vaccination in South Africa. Although our results suggest this, we cannot provide a definitive answer. Future studies, such as in-lab and natural experiments, should address this issue.

Despite these limitations, the lessons learned from our case study highlight the broader implications of media engagement in shaping public discourse. Beyond Covid-19, similar dynamics may be observed in other health crises and policy debates where misinformation competes with evidence-based information. These challenges require a proactive, sustained commitment from governments, news organizations, public health agencies, and digital platforms to ensure that accurate, credible information remains visible and accessible. Strengthening media literacy, enhancing journalistic integrity, and fostering institutional trust are crucial steps in counteracting the spread of misinformation and reinforcing informed decision-making in public debates.

Acknowledgments

We gratefully acknowledge the Swiss National Science Foundation for their financial support of the PONs—People-Opinion Networks: A study of polarization in word embeddings and social networks in Switzerland and Southern Africa project (grant number: 10001AL_205032). The authors would like to thank the other members of the PONs project, Kevin Durrheim and Mike Quayle, for their engagement in earlier phases of this manuscript.

Funding

Publication of this article in open access was made possible through the institutional membership agreement between the University of Lausanne and Cogitatio Press.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

Data are protected by X's terms of use. They can be made available upon request to the corresponding author.

LLMs Disclosure

Gemini was used for reference formatting and grammar check.

Supplementary Material

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

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MEDIA AND COMMUNICATION
ISSN: 2183-2439

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