

# DOCTORAL THESIS

Title of the Doctoral Thesis

**Counterpublics, Media Trust and Credibility in the Digital Space  
Empirical investigations of online audiences' responses to  
(right-wing) counterpublic discourse**

Submitted by

Marlene Kunst

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# Counterpublics, Media Trust and Credibility in the Digital Space – Doctoral Thesis

Name: Marlene Kunst

First supervisor: Prof. Dr. Christiane Eilders (Heinrich-Heine-Universität Düsseldorf)

Second supervisor: Prof. Dr. Martin Emmer (Freie Universität Berlin)

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## 1. Introduction

In today's digital space, where media-dissonant and media-critical views are disseminated on a large scale, mainstream media's communicative authority is increasingly challenged (Broersma, 2013). After all, the days in which news audiences had to rely on mainstream media for information about current political affairs are long gone. Nowadays, those who feel discontent and have low trust in mainstream media's news coverage can effortlessly turn to a large variety of alternative media platforms. Moreover, in digital media environments, ordinary users are no longer passive receivers but also active producers of information. Consequently, mainstream media are continually struggling to maintain their "status as 'hubs', sense-makers and licensed interpreters of what everyone out there, including the content-generating users, is saying" (McNair, 2013, p. 84). Essentially, while mainstream media are struggling to unite the public around a shared set of basic facts and interpretations, the public discourse in the digital space is becoming more dissonant, fragmented, and polarized (Broersma, 2013; Pfetsch, 2018; van Aelst et al., 2017).

In this light, digitalization has provided ideal conditions for the emergence and unfolding of counterpublics. Counterpublics are defined by views that oppose the dominant discourse of mainstream media and the perception that these views are deliberately excluded in the dominant discourse (Asen, 2000; Breese, 2011; Brouwer, 2006; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). Along with this perception comes counterpublic members' social identity of belonging to a group that is discursively marginalized and disadvantaged due to its opinions (Asen, 2000; Breese, 2011; Fraser, 1990; Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Marchi & Clark, 2018; Renninger, 2015). Counterpublic discourse, which is characterized by an explicit dissociation from the dominant public, arguments that challenge the view of the dominant discourse and a sense of collective identity have become a widespread phenomenon in today's online environments (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Especially counterpublics in the realm of right-wing populism have

used the digital space to oppose the mainstream media's presentation of issues such as immigration and multi-culturalism and to accuse journalists of censoring their views (Beiler & Kiesler, 2018; Fawzi & Obermaier, 2019; Jakob, Quiring, & Schemer, 2017; Schroeder, 2018).

So far, in communication research, counterpublics in the digital space have mainly been analyzed as a macro-phenomenon through content or network analysis (Choi & Cho, 2017; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017; Kuo, 2018; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015; Xu, 2020). In contrast, little is known about how counterpublic discourse is supported and produced by counterpublic-minded individuals – either as attentive audience members or active speakers – from the perspective of the micro-level. Exceptions are a few studies that investigated motivations and actions of counterpublic members through qualitative interviews (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Marchi & Clark, 2018; Sills et al., 2016). Yet, the way individuals interact with the counterpublic discourse they encounter online has hitherto rarely received scholarly attention. These interactions are, nevertheless, vital to the phenomenon of counterpublics: As this thesis will argue, counterpublics essentially emerge and unfold through the interaction between counterpublic discourse, which manifests at the macro-level, and the behavioral and cognitive effects that exposure to such discourse triggers in the counterpublic-minded individuals at the micro-level (see Illustration 1). Exposure to counterpublic discourse might, for instance, increase an individual's support for counterpublic views, trigger a sense of group belonging or encourage individuals to participate in counterpublic discourse by expressing counterpublic views themselves.

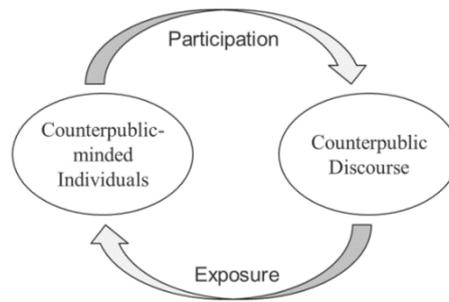


Illustration 1: Interrelations between counterpublic-minded individuals and counterpublic discourse

Against this background, the empirical studies of this Ph.D. thesis approach counterpublics from a novel perspective by empirically investigating how individuals respond to counterpublic discourse online. More specifically, the investigations aim to provide insight into effects that may increase individuals' likelihood of supporting and participating in counterpublic discourse. For this purpose, the experimental studies examined how participants assessed counterpublic discourse in terms of credibility and argument quality (Study 1 and Study 3) as well as how it affected participants' willingness to express their opinion (Study 2). These dependent variables are important indicators for individuals' general susceptibility to counterpublic discourse: If counterpublic discourse is perceived as credible and well-argued, in particular in comparison to the dominant discourse of mainstream media, it is more likely to be supported and intentionally turned to. Moreover, if exposure to counterpublic discourse triggers discursive activity among like-minded individuals, counterpublic discourse will become more prevalent in the digital space.

Another pivotal aim of this thesis was to elucidate how individual characteristics interact with the aforementioned effects, as research has shown that media effects strongly vary based on individual differences (Valkenburg & Peter, 2013). In this context, it was fundamentally expected that individuals who share counterpublic issue-attitudes would be more likely to support and participate in the counterpublic discourse they encounter online. Moreover, it was

assumed that individuals with low levels of media trust would be particularly susceptible to counterpublic discourse as it opposes the mainstream media's view and accuses mainstream media of biased reporting. Low media trust levels in parts of the population may, consequently, be one of the factors that provide counterpublics with particularly fertile ground. As Fenton and Downey (2003) argue, counterpublic spheres tend to establish when the public's trust in the dominant public sphere is low. Thus, accounting for the role of media trust is particularly important as media trust has been on a steady decline in many Western societies (Edelman Trust Barometer, 2018; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Ladd, 2012; Newman & Fletcher, 2017). Likewise, in Germany, the group of individuals with low media trust levels has continually grown over recent years, although trust in mainstream media has increased in the aggregate (Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jakob, Jakobs, et al., 2019; Jakob, Schultz, et al., 2019).

Ultimately, the overarching question that has guided this research and connects this thesis' empirical studies is outlined as follows: *How do pre-existing attitudes and media trust levels influence individuals' cognitive and behavioral responses to (right-wing) counterpublic discourse online?* By focusing on right-wing counterpublic discourse, the empirical studies aim to shed light on a current phenomenon that has strongly affected the political climate of our time. The empirical studies address the overarching research question from different angles by responding to specific research gaps. Instead of aiming to provide a definitive answer concerning the research question and, hence, pursuing an impossible endeavor, this thesis aims to provide mosaic pieces, which, combined with other research, may contribute to a more comprehensive picture. The thesis consists of the following publications:

- Study 1: Kunst, M. (2021). "References to Nationality in Crime Reporting: Effects on Perceived News Credibility and the Moderating Role of Xenophobia." Submitted to *Studies in Communication and Media* (current status: revise and resubmit). Accepted at the International Communication Association Annual Conference, Division:

Political Communication, May 27 to 31, 2021, Virtual Conference. Honored with Top Student Paper Award.

- Study 2: Kunst, M., Toepfl, F., & Dogruel, L. (2020). Spirals of Speaking Out? Effects of the “Suppressed Voice Rhetoric” on Audiences’ Willingness to Express Their Opinion. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 64(3), 397–417. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2020.1796390>. Presented at the International Communication Association Annual Conference, Division: Political Communication, May 24 to 28, 2019, Washington D.C.
- Study 3: Kunst, M. (2020). Assessments of User Comments With “Alternative Views” as a Function of Media Trust. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, 1–12. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000287>. Presented at Jahrestagung der Fachgruppe Rezeptions- und Wirkungsforschung in der Deutschen Gesellschaft für Publizistik- und Kommunikationswissenschaft, January 23 to 25, 2020, Würzburg. Honored with Top Student Paper Award.

The next chapter will set the broad theoretical framework in which this Ph.D. thesis was carried out. All of the empirical studies related to the concept of counterpublics – particularly right-wing counterpublics – and investigated cognitive or behavioral responses to (right-wing) counterpublic discourse. Accordingly, Chapter 2 elaborates on the theoretical concept of (right-wing) counterpublics. Subsequently, by visually connecting the concepts addressed in the respective empirical studies and locating them on both the micro- and macro-level, Chapter 2 illustrates how each study is linked to the overarching research question.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1. Counterpublics

Counterpublics have generally been defined as “collectives of speakers and listeners” (Wessler, 2018, p. 134), which hold opinions that oppose the dominant public’s view and feel excluded from the dominant public sphere (e.g., Asen, 2000; Brouwer, 2006; Fraser, 1990). In today’s mediated times, the dominant public sphere is mainly epitomized by mainstream media, where journalists function as the curators of public discourse by gatekeeping with regard to which views are allowed in and which are not (Ferree et al., 2002; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015).<sup>1</sup> Moreover, scholars have highlighted counterpublic members’ social identity as a marginalized group as an additional important feature of counterpublics (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Marchi & Clark, 2018; Renninger, 2015). Social identities of counterpublics are generally enforced through interactions online, which increase these individuals’ awareness of the existence of a larger virtual group that shares the same attitudes and feelings of exclusion (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Marchi & Clark, 2018). Nonetheless, the term counterpublics cannot simply be equated with individuals who, together, represent a social group: Instead, in the academic literature, counterpublics are conceptualized as subordinated public spheres, which are, indeed, characterized by its participants but also by a common discursive pattern and a communicative space (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015).

Drawing on counterpublic theory (Asen, 2000; Dahlberg, 2011; Downey & Fenton, 2003; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002), Toepfl and Piwoni (2015) argue that the common discursive pattern – or in other words, counterpublic discourse – shares three main features. First, in counterpublic discourse, the counterpublic is explicitly demarcated from the dominant public sphere by, for instance, claiming that the counterpublics’ views are marginalized in the

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<sup>1</sup> Mainstream media can generally be defined as the traditional, legacy journalistic media that belong to media corporations and reach large audiences (Prochazka & Schweiger, 2018). The term in itself – as applied in this thesis and other academic literature – does not necessarily imply that these media share a consensual outlook on political and societal issues and cover these issues similarly (although right-wing counterpublics have applied the term in this manner).

dominant discourse. Second, in counterpublic discourse, the dominant public's view is challenged with counterpublic arguments, or in other words, alternative views. And third, counterpublic discourse attempts to create a sense of social identification among counterpublic-minded individuals. These features of counterpublic discourse have been detected with regard to a wide variety of counterpublics, such as right-wing populist citizens in Germany (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015), the anti-beef movement in Korea (Choi & Cho, 2017), Muslim bloggers in Germany (Eckert & Chadha, 2013) or high-school students with working-class, immigration backgrounds in the U.S. (Marchi & Clark, 2018)

Concerning the communicative spaces of counterpublics, digitalization has provided infinite opportunities (Bennett & Pfetsch, 2018; Dahlgren, 2005; Hagen, 2015; Holt, 2019; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). Yet, it has to be pointed out that the lines between the communicative spaces of the dominant public and those of counterpublics can at times be blurry. After all, counterpublics do not only aim to communicate inwardly with their members but also pursue the “outward-oriented goal” of changing the dominant discourse (Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2017, p. 2014). Counterpublics are, thus, not only active in digital enclaves and echo-chambers but also in communicative online spaces where they can reach wider audiences, such as comment sections under news articles or social media platforms (Downey & Fenton, 2003; Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Kaiser, 2017; Kuo, 2018; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2017). As Kaiser (2017) argues concerning comment sections, these communicative online spaces can be regarded as a “public battleground for contestation where members of mainstream publics and counterpublics meet” (p. 1661).

Overall, much of the counterpublic theory that has just been outlined can be attributed to Nancy Fraser's (1990) original conceptualization of the phenomenon. Essentially, Fraser's (1990) theoretical reasoning was based on a critical examination of Habermasian public sphere theory, which she criticized for neglecting the multiple subordinated public spheres that exist

in diverse societies. Moreover, to Fraser (1990), the public sphere that Habermas considered normatively desirable (namely, the 18<sup>th</sup>-century salon) was an instrument of political domination, through which the bourgeois attempted to control other strata of society. Consequently, Fraser (1990) regarded subordinated public spheres as essential for marginalized groups to “invent and circulate counter-discourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (p. 124). In this regard, it needs to be highlighted that the theoretical concept of counterpublics was initially developed to analyze left-wing progressive movements, such as feminist groups, which liberal academics considered beneficial to the state of democracy (Dahlgren, 2005; Fraser, 1990; Holt, 2019). Scholars have, therefore, only reluctantly analyzed reactionary movements through the lens of counterpublic theory (Holt, 2019). Yet, according to Fraser (1990), counterpublics are not necessarily progressive and virtuous but may even be explicitly anti-democratic. As Thimsen (2017) pointedly asks:

“If a counterpublic describes itself as excluded from dominant modes of publicity and both claims and demonstrates a lack of discursive privilege in relation to some larger, more powerful public, what is the difference between left-progressive and right-conservative counterpublicity?” (p.270)

In fact, right-wing counterpublics do not only fulfill the theoretical criteria but have also strategically staged their counterpublicity by vocally complaining about their exclusion from the dominant discourse (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015). In this context, right-wing counterpublics have, in particular, expressed extremely hostile and aggressive attitudes toward mainstream media (Fawzi, 2019; Hagen, 2015; Haller & Holt, 2019). While counterpublics’ feelings of exclusions do not have to be grounded in objectively ascertainable facts, the right-wing counterpublic’s perception corresponds to reality: Particularly in Germany, most mainstream media have, indeed, excluded or criticized right-wing counterpublic’s views,

as most journalists consider them inhuman or reactionary (Aalberg et al., 2016; Krämer, 2018a; Krüger, 2016; Schärdel, 2016; Schroeder, 2018; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018).

## **2.2. A Macro- and Micro-Perspective on Counterpublics**

In communication research, counterpublics in the digital space have mainly been researched through network or text analysis as phenomena that emerge on the macro-level (e.g., Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Kaiser, 2017; Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017; Kuo, 2018; Renninger, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2017). Yet, from the perspective of the micro-level, counterpublics are created by the participants of counterpublic discourse – in other words, by the “speakers and listeners” (Wessler, 2018, p. 134) or the “speakers and attentive audiences” (Toepfl & Piwoni, 2015, p. 470). From such a people-centered view, right-wing counterpublics consist not only of right-wing populist politicians but, among others, of online discussants, street protesters, and those who sympathize and expose themselves to these acts of speech. Put simply, for counterpublic discourse to exist, there need to be people who support and engage in such discourse. Against this background, the empirical studies of this Ph.D. thesis aim to elucidate cognitive and behavioral effects that are triggered at the micro-level of the individual when exposed to counterpublic discourse.

For this purpose, experiments were regarded as the most suitable method, even though the methodology entailed some challenges. First, while the experimental stimuli contained *features* of counterpublic discourse, it could not capture the complexity of counterpublic discourse that emerges over time in particular communicative spaces. Second, participants' responses to one-time exposure to these features do not imply that these individuals have now become counterpublic-minded individuals who participate in counterpublic discourse and adopt a counterpublic social identity. Nevertheless, experimental research can offer valuable insight into factors that may provide favorable conditions for counterpublics. In this context, by investigating how features of counterpublic discourse affect individuals' assessment of the

contents' credibility and argument quality (Study 1 and 3) and individuals' willingness to speak out (Study 2), the empirical studies of this thesis shed light on audiences' general susceptibility to counterpublic discourse. Moreover, by accounting for the role of pre-existing attitudes and media trust in these processes, the findings indicate how a polarized public opinion, as well as the decline of media trust in parts of the population, may drive counterpublic discourse in the digital space.

Illustration 2 visualizes the relationship between the concepts addressed in this thesis and locates them on the micro-and macro-level. First of all, on the micro-level, it is assumed that potential participants of today's (right-wing) counterpublic discourse are characterized by a combination of (right-wing populist) issue-attitudes and low levels of media trust (especially concerning the specific issue around which the counterpublic forms). Particularly in the case of right-wing counterpublics, a negative stance on mainstream media is an essential component of their narrative and social identity (Holt, 2019). Moreover, Illustration 2 points to the interrelation between the (right-wing) counterpublic discourse that manifests at the macro-level and the psychological processes within individuals at the micro-level when being exposed to such discourse. As visualized, these psychological processes, which may cause individuals to engage in counterpublic discourse through behavior or cognition, are likely to be influenced by individuals' pre-existing attitudes and media trust levels.

**Micro-Level**

**Macro-Level**

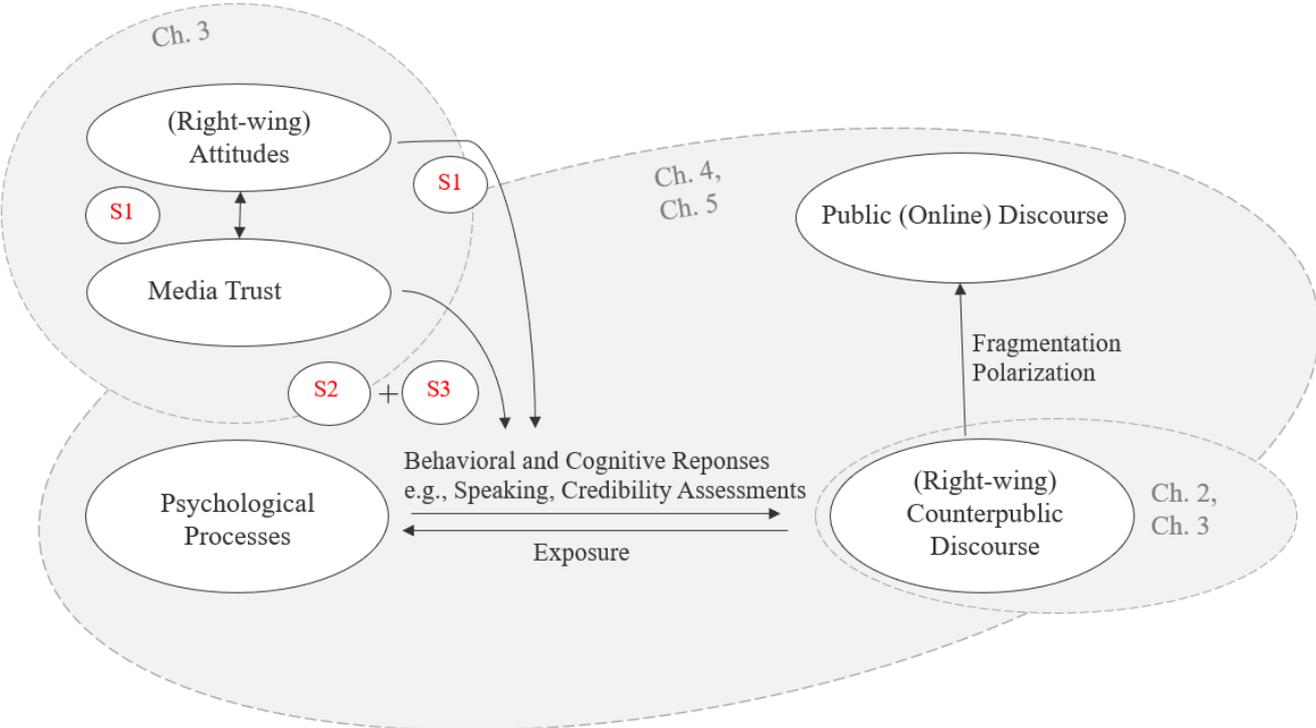


Illustration 2: Interconnections between concepts addressed in the empirical investigations

As depicted in Illustration 2, the first study (S1) of this thesis examined the influence of pre-existing right-wing attitudes on the effect of exposure to right-wing counterpublic discourse. More specifically, S1 investigated how features of right-wing counterpublic discourse in news articles affected the audience’s perceived news credibility. Thereby, the empirical findings also shed light on some potential reasons for the negative correlation between right-wing attitudes and trust in mainstream media that has been found by previous studies (e.g., Fawzi, 2019; Jakob, Schultz, et al., 2017; Jandura et al., 2018; Krämer, 2018b; Krüger, 2016; Newman & Fletcher, 2017). In contrast, both Study 2 (S2) and Study 3 (S3) investigated the influence of media trust on the psychological processes that are triggered by exposure to certain features of counterpublic discourse. While S2 investigated effects on the willingness to speak out, S3 was concerned with effects on perceived credibility and argument quality.

Lastly, Illustration 2 visualizes the relationship between (right-wing) counterpublic discourse and the public discourse as a whole – first and foremost, concerning the digital space, as this is where counterpublics are particularly active. As counterpublic discourse strongly opposes the dominant discourse and emphasizes its conflict with mainstream media, it constitutes a polarizing element for the public discourse. Moreover, if parts of the population increasingly turn to counterpublic discourse, for instance through alternative media, while turning away from mainstream media, the public discourse becomes more fragmented. Such potential implications are discussed in the conclusion of this paper in light of the empirical findings.

Hereafter, Chapter 3 will provide the broad contextual background against which the empirical investigations were carried out. While the empirical studies address very specific examples of counterpublic discourse and its effects, Chapter 3 aims to embed the research endeavors in the larger societal context. As already stated, a focus of this thesis lies on counterpublics in the realm of right-wing populism due to their political relevance and strong visibility in the digital space. Thus, Chapter 3 will elaborate on the roots of right-wing populist counterpublicity by diving deeper into right-wing populist ideology, right-wing populist discourse, and the characteristics of its supporters.

### **3. The Counterpublicity of Right-Wing Populism**

#### **3.1. Populist Ideology and Counterpublic Narratives**

Populism is often referred to as a thin ideology because in contrast to, for example, socialism or liberalism, it lacks the comprehensive integration of multiple political and social issues (Mudde, 2004; Wolf, 2017). Instead, populist ideology can mainly be reduced to one core idea, which is the opposition between good, homogenous people on one side and corrupt, untrustworthy elites, on the other side (Mouffe, 2005; Mudde, 2004). In the view of populists, the elites consist of politicians of the established parties, mainstream journalists, intellectuals,

or more generally, the powerful, who all act against the collective will of the people (Haller & Holt, 2019; Mouffe, 2005; Mudde, 2004). Populist politicians, thus, claim to be the mouthpiece of the assumingly coherent *vox populi*, which is neglected and marginalized by the establishment (Wolf, 2017). The vertical distinction between the homogenous group of purportedly hard-working, reasonable, and honest people, on the one hand, and the corrupt elites, on the other hand, applies to both left- and right-wing populists (Wolf, 2017). However, the horizontal distinction between homogenous people and societal outgroups, especially immigrants, is in Germany and most other Western countries only characteristic of right-wing populism (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2013; Reinemann et al., 2017; Wolf, 2017).

Based on this ideological perspective, right-wing populists have accused mainstream media of neglecting issues that are unprofitable for the elites and concealing information that does not fit into mainstream journalists' liberal views on societal outgroups such as immigrants (Haller & Holt, 2019). Mainstream media are thus depicted as having collectively conspired against the people's truth (Fawzi & Obermaier, 2019). Although mainstream media have always been criticized by their audiences, the criticism they have received from right-wing populists during recent years has been unprecedentedly hostile and aggressive (Fawzi, 2019; Haller & Holt, 2019). For instance, in Germany, mainstream media have been branded as *Lügenpresse* ("lying press") and, thereby, not only been accused of excluding right-wing populist views but also of deliberately disseminating untrue information (Hagen, 2015). As Koliska and Assman (2019) argue, *Lügenpresse* is a historically and politically charged expression that is "questioning the legitimacy of journalism as an institution and undermining its very existence" (p. 2). Whilst such aggressive rhetoric toward mainstream media has also been applied by ordinary users online (e.g., in comment sections; Prochazka & Schweiger, 2016) or street protesters (PEGIDA), it has been particularly distinctive in terms of the communication of right-wing populist politicians (Krämer, 2018a). Because right-wing populist politicians are public

figures, by applying such anti-media rhetoric, they are likely to foster further aversions to mainstream media among their supporters (Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018). Eventually, the “us vs. mainstream media” rhetoric of right-wing populists is likely to create a counterpublic social identity among like-minded individuals based on the feeling of being marginalized in the dominant discourse (Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019). Being excluded from mainstream media and staging themselves as counterpublics may, thus, be an advantage to the cohesion of right-wing populist movements (Aalberg et al., 2016).

Moreover, accusations against mainstream media are often linked to the argument that mainstream journalists have submitted to the dictate of political correctness and therefore conceal important information, such as the ethnic background of criminals (Fawzi, 2019; Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018a; Mudde, 2004). Political correctness is commonly understood as the conscious use of language to prevent the offense or the discrimination of people due to their gender, sexual orientation, ethnic or religious belonging, social class, age, or disabilities (Forster, 2010). In this context, mainstream media have to some extent given in to the right-wing counterpublics’ ideas of what counts as relevant information (Holt, 2019) Thus, it has, for instance, become more common among mainstream media to refer to perpetrators’ ethnic backgrounds in crime-related news reporting (Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018a). In this sense, right-wing counterpublic discourse has, to some extent, reached the outward-oriented goal of altering the dominant discourse.

Yet, right-wing populist parties stick to their narrative, which Rosen (2018) in regard to the German populist party *Alternative für Deutschland (AFD)* describes as follows:

Keep accusing the press of ‘political correctness’. Claiming to speak for a disconnected population that journalists have no idea about. Worry about headlines with calculated border crossings and taboo breaks, and when journalists try to counter all this free advertising with critical questions, just play the victim. And always claim, even though

the general attention is focused on your issues, that the mainstream media doesn't want to talk about them. (para. 17)

To sum up, right-wing populists have staged themselves as courageous and truth-seeking taboo breakers, who are unwilling to subordinate themselves to any formal or informal rules (Greven, 2016; Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2017; Mudde, 2004). Evidently, the great electoral successes of right-wing populist parties in many Western countries have shown that these counterpublic narratives have been well received by large parts of the population. Against this background, the next sub-chapter will showcase an in-depth look at factors that are likely to be associated with support for right-wing counterpublic discourse. Thereby, the focus will be placed on media trust, as counterpublic spheres first and foremost tend to flourish when there is a lack of perceived legitimacy of the dominant public sphere (Fenton & Downey, 2003).

### **3.2. Supporters of Right-wing Counterpublic Discourse**

While the term “populism” generally refers to the ideology or discursive style of political parties or politicians, scholars have become increasingly interested in populist citizens, that is, citizens who support populist politics (e.g., Akkerman et al., 2014; Oliver & Rahn, 2016; Schulz, Müller, et al., 2018). As such, measurements of populist attitudes on the citizen level contain three sub-components: people-centrism, anti-pluralism, and anti-elitism (Castanho Silva et al., 2020). Populist citizens do, thus, tend to support popular sovereignty, believe in a homogenous people with a coherent will, and are highly suspicious of elites (Schulz, Müller, et al., 2018). Intriguingly, empirical studies have shown that such populist attitudes are associated with hostile media perceptions as well as adversarial attitudes toward mainstream media (Schindler et al., 2018; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018). Schindler et al. (2018) argue that the reason for this association is the incoherence between the mainstream media's attempt to represent diverse political standpoints and actors, and populist citizens' belief in a singular collective will that is shared by the homogenous people (Schindler et al., 2018). Another

plausible reason is that journalists are perceived as elites as they do not only hold close connections to the political establishment but are also often academics (Krüger, 2016; Schindler et al., 2018). Consequently, populist citizens' anti-elitist sentiments are likely to have a negative effect on trust in mainstream media (Schindler et al., 2018; Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2018; van Dalen, 2019). Moreover, trust tends to be contagious, which is why low trust in public institutions, such as the government, may foster low trust in mainstream media and vice versa (Decker & Brähler, 2016; Hanitzsch et al., 2018; Jakob, Schultz, et al., 2017; Jandura et al., 2018).

Besides the negative association between populist attitudes and levels of media trust, research has shown that individuals with right-wing political attitudes tend to have lower trust in media than individuals with left-wing political attitudes (Decker & Brähler, 2016; Jakob, Schultz, et al., 2017; Lee, 2010; Melican & Dixon, 2008; Newman & Fletcher, 2017; Schranz et al., 2016; Schulz, Müller, et al., 2018). Thus, the combination of right-wing attitudes and a populist worldview in individuals is often associated with particularly low levels of media trust (Fawzi & Mothes, 2020; Schindler et al., 2018). One general explanation for low media trust among individuals at the ends of the political spectrum is the hostile media effect, which implies that individuals with strong partisan attitudes perceive media content as more biased against their view, even if it is in fact neutral (Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Hansen & Kim, 2011). Yet, the fact that media trust is generally lower among individuals at the right end than among individuals at the left end indicates that the former may face actual opposition from mainstream media (Schindler et al., 2018). Research indicates that in Germany, this is the case as mainstream media are not very polarized and do not capture the whole opinion spectrum of the public (Newman & Fletcher, 2017; Quiring et al., 2020). According to Krüger (2016), most journalists in Germany are academics with liberal worldviews, which is why conservative petty-bourgeois values and precarious life situations are severely underrepresented. Consequently, feelings of alienation are likely to emerge among those individuals whose views on issues are

far more right-wing conservative than the mainstream media's view (Krüger, 2016). Generally, it is likely that such individuals turn away from mainstream media and seek out alternative media platforms that provide counterpublic discourse (see Jakob, Schultz, et al., 2019; Jandura et al., 2018; Ladd, 2012; Leung & Lee, 2014; Mourão et al., 2018; Schielicke et al., 2014; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). The consumption of alternative media is, in turn, likely to strengthen audiences' pre-existing negative views on mainstream media due to its media-critical content (Schielicke et al., 2014; Strömbäck et al., 2020; Tsfati & Cappella, 2003). In Europe, in particular, right-wing alternative media tend to disseminate anti-media, anti-system, and anti-elite sentiments (Haller & Holt, 2019; Holt, 2019).

Lastly, the right-wing counterpublic narrative of mainstream media's exaggerated political correctness may not only resonate with right-wing populist individuals who have low media trust, but with larger parts of the population. A representative survey study revealed that 41% of the German population thinks that political correctness in Germany is exaggerated, and 57% is annoyed by the social prescriptions and norms (Köcher, 2019). The feeling that one needs to be overly careful with regard to the use of language is prevalent in relation to the issues of refugees, Islam, the Nazi era, Jews, right-wing extremism, patriotism, homosexuality, third gender, or the AFD (Köcher, 2019). In this context, parts of the population lament a too narrow corridor of opinions and claim to be unfoundedly marked as extremists if expressing uncomfortable truths (Jakob, Schultz, et al., 2019; Krüger, 2016). Quiring et al. (2020) link these perceptions of speech bans to social-psychological theory of public opinion, which regards public opinion as a social force that is mainly created through mainstream media and serves to ensure social cohesion within societies (see Glynn & Huge, 2014; Lamp, 2009; Noelle-Neumann, 1980; Quiring et al., 2020). Individuals with opinions that deviate from the perceived consensual opinion of the majority, which is mainly represented by mainstream media, are perceived as potential threats to a society's ability to act and decide (Noelle-

Neumann, 1980; Quiring et al., 2020). To prevent such disturbances, individuals who express deviant opinions are socially sanctioned, for instance, through mockery or public denunciation (Lamp, 2009; Quiring et al., 2020). As Noelle-Neumann (1980) puts it, most individuals with deviant opinions tend to be socially controlled through their fear of social isolation. Accordingly, Quiring et al. (2020) found that individuals who perceived a speech ban based on political correctness were less willing to speak out. However, the fact that, especially in online environments, politically incorrect opinions are expressed openly and frequently may be caused by these individuals' feeling that the politically correct views do not reflect the majority views (Quiring et al., 2020). Frequent exposure to right-wing counterpublic discourse may, instead, have created the impression that politically incorrect opinions are the majority opinion – at least with regard to the active groups in the digital public sphere or with regard to one's relevant reference groups (Jakob, Schultz, et al., 2017; Schulz & Roessler, 2012).

This chapter discussed the roots of right-wing counterpublicity by elaborating on right-wing populism, its central counterpublic narratives, and characteristics of the discourses' potential supporters. Thereby, it set the broad contextual background for the respective empirical studies of this thesis, which will be presented in the next chapter.

## **4. Studies and Methods**

### **4.1. Presentation of the Empirical Studies**

While each of the studies in this Ph.D. project address different research gaps, they are all embedded in the theoretical and contextual frameworks that were laid out in the previous chapters. All studies are concerned with the following research question: *How do pre-existing attitudes and media trust levels influence individuals' cognitive and behavioral responses to (right-wing) counterpublic discourse online?* Essentially, the studies investigated exemplary cases of counterpublic discourse and audience responses. Below, all the studies are presented

in greater detail, followed by a discussion of the disadvantages and advantages of web-based survey experiments as the methodological approach.

### **Study 1: References to Nationality in Crime Reporting: Effects on Perceived News Credibility and the Moderating Role of Xenophobia**

Study 1 investigated the effects of references to nationality, or the absence thereof, in crime-related news items on an audience's perceived news credibility. The contextual background of this research endeavor was outlined in the previous chapter: In many Western countries, right-wing counterpublics have accused mainstream media of disguising criminals' foreign origins for the sake of political correctness (Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018a). While right-wing alternative media put particular emphasis on foreign nationalities of criminals, mainstream media in Germany and other Western countries used to be very reluctant to disclose this information (Holt, 2019). In a simplified way, naming criminals' foreign nationality can be regarded as a feature of counterpublic discourse whereas not naming it can be regarded as a feature of the dominant discourse. However, some mainstream media have now made it their editorial policy to always report the nationality of perpetrators to avert further loss of credibility among certain audience segments and, thus, prevent them from actively seeking out right-wing alternative media. The public discourse in mainstream media has, thus, adapted to the expectations of specific (right-wing) audience segments and, to some extent, drawn closer to right-wing counterpublic discourse.

Yet, the effects of naming criminals' national background on the perceived credibility of news articles have so far not been empirically established. To fill this gap, a web-based survey experiment (N = 261) was conducted that took into account right-wing attitudes in terms of xenophobia as a moderating factor. It was expected that, particularly for individuals with xenophobic attitudes, crime-related news stories would trigger chronically accessible racial stereotypes of foreign criminals (see Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Schmuck et al., 2018). For these

individuals, it was assumed that news stories in which the perpetrator was said to be foreign would be consistent with the activated racial stereotype and, thus, be perceived as more credible than news articles that lacked this information. This hypothesis was supported. The finding corresponds to research within a range of different fields, such as motivated reasoning, cognitive dissonance, and confirmation bias, showing that individuals tend to perceive attitude-congruent content as more credible than attitude-incongruent content (Fischer et al., 2005; Kuru et al., 2017; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger et al., 2020; Nickerson, 1998; Oyedele, 2010). Moreover, it was assumed that due to the right-wing counterpublic narrative on political correctness, individuals with xenophobic attitudes would suspect news items without nationality references of deliberately disguising the migrant background of the perpetrator. In other words, it was assumed that xenophobic individuals would have adopted the right-wing counterpublic narrative and apply it whenever xenophobic attitudes are not confirmed. This suspicion was, in turn, expected to diminish the credibility perception of the news item. The findings of the study largely supported this assumption.

Overall, the findings indicate that media outlets, which adapt to right-wing counterpublic discourse may, to some extent, enhance news credibility perceptions among xenophobic individuals. Hence, mainstream media may regard the naming of criminal's nationality as a suitable strategic element to prevent further loss of media trust within parts of the population and avert their exodus to right-wing alternative media. However, the empirical findings showed that credibility perceptions only increased if perpetrators were referred to as foreign citizens but not if they were referred to as domestic citizens. Yet, the majority of criminal offenses in Germany are conducted by German citizens (Bundeskriminalamt, 2019). Thus, if mainstream media decide to always name perpetrators' nationality (regardless of whether it is foreign or domestic), there will be plenty of crime-related news articles in which the criminal will be referred to as a domestic citizen. In these cases, xenophobic individuals are likely to believe that the perpetrator's migrant background is being deliberately concealed.

Overall, this is an advantage for right-wing alternative media, which tend to emphasize crimes conducted by foreigners. Moreover, right-wing alternative media tend to stress migrant backgrounds for criminals who hold domestic citizenship whenever these exist (Holt, 2019). Among mainstream media, whether the nationality of criminals should be named in crime-related news is already a controversial issue. Naming the migrant backgrounds of criminals is even more controversial and, for most mainstream media, ethically unacceptable. After all, mainstream journalists tend to represent liberal values and norms and feel responsible for not stirring up xenophobic sentiments within the public (Krüger, 2016; Urban & Schweiger, 2014). Lastly, if mainstream media, against all odds, decide to inform about the migrant backgrounds of criminals (which in Germany, they occasionally do), this study's findings indicate that this decision is at the expense of trust within the non-xenophobic audience segments. Therefore, polarized attitudes toward immigration within the population make it impossible for mainstream media to please all their audience segments at the same time.

### **Study 2: Spirals of Speaking Out? Effects of the “Suppressed Voice Rhetoric” on Audiences’ Willingness to Express their Opinion**

Essentially, Study 2 deals with the same phenomenon as Study 1: It addresses individuals' perceptions that views or facts that look upon refugees or immigration with disfavor are suppressed or concealed in mainstream media. This feature of counterpublic discourse is in Study 2 referred to as *suppressed voice rhetoric* (SVR). The SVR contains the argument that certain views and facts that do not fit into mainstream journalists' agendas are censored and that one experiences social sanctions when expressing these views. Although the SVR has been frequently applied, first and foremost by right-wing counterpublics, little is known about its effect on an audience. In an effort to make an initial contribution to filling this gap, Study 2 investigated how SVR in comment sections affects audience members' willingness to speak out.

This study conceptualized the SVR as a polarizing communication style that consists of an “us versus them” frame, accentuating a conflict between the mainstream public and the right-wing counterpublic. Drawing on social identity theory (see Tajfel & Turner, 2004), it was expected that the SVR would trigger a sense of group belonging among those who share the perception of being excluded from the mainstream public sphere. To measure this conditional effect, the study accounted for media trust with regard to mainstream media’s news reporting on refugees as moderating factor. The sense of group belonging was, in turn, assumed to increase the willingness to speak out as it would make individuals feel more socially supported and more powerful. The findings of the web-based survey experiment (N = 464) supported these assumptions: Participants who had low levels of media trust were more eager to express their opinions when user comments did not only reject the admission of refugees into the European Union but also applied the SVR. Lastly, the findings of Study 2 indicate that the feeling of being suppressed and the “us vs. the mainstream” frame of right-wing counterpublics are likely to trigger a sense of social identity within like-minded individuals. As has already been argued, the creation of shared social identity has been identified as one of the central features of counterpublic discourse.

The effects that were found in this study may have pivotal implications for the dynamic of counterpublic discourse online. When more and more individuals participate in counterpublic discourse by expressing their immigration-critical opinions in the digital public sphere and claiming that these opinions are suppressed in the mainstream discourse, this may trigger spirals of speaking out. Consequently, views that mainstream media deliberately exclude may become particularly visible in the digital space. Whereas in the dominant public sphere, mainstream media journalists function as gatekeepers who curate the range of visible opinions, in communicative online spaces, they have little control over which views ordinary users chose to disseminate. Consequently, to some extent, excluding certain views from the mainstream

media discourse may be counterproductive because it may increase the dissemination of precisely these views in the digital public sphere.

This potential consequence puts mainstream journalists in a dilemma. As already argued with regard to Study 1, mainstream journalists may have good reasons to exclude views of right-wing counterpublics from the mainstream discourse – not only because they disagree but also because they aim to prevent xenophobic sentiments in public opinion (Krüger, 2016). Thus, due to ethical concerns, mainstream media are unlikely to give in to all the demands of right-wing counterpublics by, for instance, putting a focus on the negative sides of immigration. Eventually, slight alterations of the mainstream media discourse are unlikely to satisfy right-wing counterpublics (as seen in Study 1), which is why they are likely to continue to apply the SVR even if mainstream media draw closer to their demands.

### **Study 3: Assessments of User Comments with “Alternative Views” as a Function of Media Trust**

Study 1 and Study 2 were concerned with individuals’ interactions with specific features of right-wing counterpublic discourse on immigration and refugees. In contrast, Study 3 investigated how individuals more generally respond to the feature of counterarguments – or in other words, alternative views – in counterpublic discourse. For this purpose, the study examined effects of alternative views on various fictional issues. More specifically, the scholarly interest of this study was to examine whether levels of media trust would influence how individuals assess user comments that are dissonant with the mainstream media’s view compared to user comments that are congruent with the mainstream media’s view in terms of credibility and argument evaluation. In this context, one pivotal research question was whether individuals with extremely low media trust, who in Germany tend to be right-wing populist citizens, would generally be inclined to support alternative views that circulate online. The hypotheses of this study were theoretically grounded in heuristic information processing and

motivated reasoning (e.g., Chaiken, 1980; Kunda, 1990; Metzger et al., 2010; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986).

The assumption that media-dissonant and media-congruent user comments would depend on individuals' levels of media trust was supported by the findings of the web-based survey experiment (N = 166): Relative to media-congruent user comments, participants with high levels of media trust were more skeptical toward media-dissonant user comments than participants with low levels of media trust. Participants with low levels of media trust, on the other hand, tended to assess media-dissonant and media-congruent user comments equally. Ultimately, there was no empirical evidence for the assumption that participants with extremely low levels of media trust would inherently favor media-dissonant user comments over media-congruent user comments. This finding indicates that individuals with very low levels of media trust do not refuse on principle views that are supported by mainstream media. Also, they are not inherently drawn to counterpublic discourse just because it opposes the mainstream media's view.

In the end, given the fact that counterpublic discourse can also be virtuous, the normative implications of the findings are ambivalent. On the one hand, one could argue that only participants with low levels of media trust assessed user comments fairly. After all, a deliberative public discourse requires that participants are allowed to introduce any assertion whatsoever, which also implies challenges to the mainstream discourse (Guttman, 2012). Thus, if commenters with alternative views inherently start from a position of disadvantage, this will diminish the deliberative potential of comment sections. On the other hand, it can be argued that in light of the prevalence of fake facts, misinformation, and conspiracy as well as the activity of anti-democratic counterpublics, an inherent skepticism toward user comments with alternative views is necessary. In this light, high levels of media trust may prevent individuals from falling prey to the myriad of unfounded claims that circulate online. Thus, given these circumstances of the digital public sphere, it may be rational to be more skeptical about

alternative views (as a central feature of counterpublic discourse) than about media-congruent user comments.

#### **4.2. Methodological Considerations and Limitations**

To investigate how exposure to specific features of counterpublic discourse would affect individuals' assessment of it or discursive behavior, web-based survey experiments were chosen as the most suitable methodological approach. In comparison to other methods, experiments are particularly suited to investigating causal effects by manipulating the one thing that is assumed to make a change while maintaining everything else constant (Coleman, 2019; Koch et al., 2019). As participants were randomly assigned to the experimental groups, systematic variance in individual characteristics across the experimental groups was unlikely (see Coleman, 2019; Koch et al., 2019). Consequently, the internal validity of the experiments was high as there is a strong probability that the effects were triggered by the manipulations and not by any confounds (see Coleman, 2019; Koch et al., 2019). While such certainty of causality is a strong advantage of the experimental method, "external validity can be as big of a threat to experiments as internal validity is to observational studies" (Coleman, 2019, p. 112).

A study is deemed externally valid if its effects can also be observed in real life (Coleman, 2019). Consequently, one factor that influences external validity is whether the circumstances of the experiment are realistic, also referred to as ecological validity (Coleman, 2019). In the above-mentioned empirical studies, the experiments were not conducted in the laboratory but in the participants' homes using their own computers. The downside of participation at home is that it decreases the researcher's control. It is possible that participants were unfocused when answering the survey questions because they, for instance, were simultaneously watching television or speaking on the phone. Furthermore, the study participants were recruited from commercial online access panels, and research has indicated that participants from these samples tend to be particularly inattentive (Goodman et al., 2013). Thus, in order to at least mitigate the concern around this issue, in each study, participants had

to complete simple attention tests during the survey and were excluded if they failed to answer the questions correctly (see Oppenheimer et al., 2009).

The upside of participation at home is not only that it requires less organizational effort but also that ecological validity tends to be higher compared to participation in the artificial environments of computer laboratories. After all, participants were exposed to the stimuli in the same context as they usually consume news. Moreover, to increase ecological validity, the stimuli were created to be as realistic as possible. Thus, the design of the news stimuli was taken from real online news sites, and the texts were, if possible, adopted from real news stories and real user comments. Nonetheless, even if ecological validity is strong, there always remains a risk that people respond differently to a stimulus in an experimental survey than they would when encountering such a stimulus during their everyday news consumption (Coleman, 2019; Koch et al., 2019).

Moreover, in today's digital media environment, individuals' news consumption is strongly personalized and tends to consist of attitude-consistent information (Bennett & Iyengar, 2008; Pariser, 2011; Sunstein, 2001; van Aelst et al., 2017). Thus, even though the stimuli reflected common phenomena in the digital public sphere, it is possible that some of the participants would never be exposed to such content in real life. Moreover, as Holbert et al. (2010) argue, the cognitive effects of media that individuals actively choose to consume may differ from content they are exposed to without making an active choice (see also Chaffee & Metzger, 2001). Thus, for more realistic settings, experimental research would have to take into account, first, whether each participant would be likely to be exposed to the content at all, and, second, whether she or he would subsequently choose to read or watch the content.

Another factor that influences the external validity of a study is whether the findings are generalizable to people other than the ones who participated (Coleman, 2019; Koch et al., 2019). In this regard, it has, for instance, been questioned whether the results of experimental studies using convenience samples based on students may be specific to this social group and

would, therefore, not occur in a similar manner in the broader public (Druckman & Kam, 2009; Sears, 1986). Hence, to ensure diversity in terms of age, gender, and education, the samples of all the experimental studies of this Ph.D. thesis were drawn from a commercial online access panel (*Respondi*). Moreover, in Study 1, quotas based on official statistics of the German public in terms of age, gender, and education were applied in order to resemble a representative sample. Research has shown that even if samples from commercial online access panels are slightly less representative than national probability samples, this does not produce different effects in experimental research (Berinsky et al., 2012; Simons & Chabris, 2012). For Study 1, it can thus be assumed that the obtained effects would have been similar if one had used a national probability sample.

The samples of Study 2 and Study 3 were also diverse in terms of age, gender, and education but deviated from the distribution of the official statistics of the German public. In Study 2, the sample was more educated than the German public, and in Study 3, the sample was slightly more male, more educated, and older. The divergences were partly related to the deliberate overrepresentation of AfD voters in both samples. Because AfD voters are especially likely to have extremely low media trust (Bachl, 2018), this strategy helped to ensure that the sample would contain sufficient participants with very low media trust. Thus, for the experiments in Study 2 and Study 3, it was meaningful to deviate from a representative sample in order to test the hypotheses, particularly among those individuals who would be most likely to be affected by the stimuli.

Lastly, it also needs to be emphasized that the findings are only generalizable to other Western countries with similar social and political contexts. In other words, it must be taken into account that the findings of the experiments are context-related as they are closely linked to the current polarization of political discourse in Germany. In particular, Study 1 and Study 2 take their starting points from German right-wing counterpublics, polarized communication environments, and accusations of the censoring of views and facts by mainstream media.

Moreover, in Study 3, it is presumed that there are issues regarding whether the mainstream media coverage is almost consonant, which might be likely in Germany but is rather unlikely in countries with more strongly polarized media systems.

Yet, in the end, the main aim and strength of experiments is not to be generalizable but to establish causality (Coleman, 2019). Thus, the experimental approaches in this thesis served to provide initial empirical evidence for the existence of causal effects that were suggested by theory.

## **5. Conclusion**

In today's polarized political climate, individuals who navigate through the digital space are likely to encounter content that is disseminated by counterpublics. Such counterpublic discourse is typically characterized by claims of being excluded and neglected in the dominant discourse and by views that oppose the mainstream media's view (Asen, 2000; Brouwer, 2006; Fraser, 1990; Warner, 2002). In this regard, particularly right-wing counterpublics have exploited communicative online spaces to express their resentment towards mainstream media as well as alternative viewpoints. While counterpublics are commonly researched as macro-phenomena (e.g., Jackson & Foucault Welles, 2015, 2016; Kaiser, 2017; Kaiser & Puschmann, 2017; Renninger, 2015; Toepfl & Piwoni, 2017), this publication-based Ph.D. thesis is concerned with the way individuals respond to specific features of counterpublic discourse on the micro-level. More specifically, the empirical investigations addressed cognitive and behavioral responses to features of counterpublic discourse by accounting for the role of individuals' pre-existing attitudes and media trust levels.

Overall, by examining individuals' assessments of counterpublic discourse in terms of credibility and argument quality, as well as their willingness to speak out, the empirical findings offered insights into the likelihood of individuals to support or participate in counterpublic discourse themselves. Thereby, the studies shed light on factors that may spur counterpublic

discourse and offered social-psychological explanations for the prevalence of counterpublic discourse in the digital space. However, the empirical studies solely investigated exemplary cases. Effects of counterpublic discourse may be researched from multiple perspectives, and knowledge about individuals' interaction with counterpublic discourse will gradually expand with the accumulation of such research.

### **5.1. Summary of Findings**

Study 1 and Study 2 were related to the specific narrative of right-wing counterpublic discourse, which claims that in the dominant discourse about immigration, inconvenient truths are neglected and political dissenters are stigmatized if they express their opinion (Fawzi, 2019; Mudde, 2004). The findings of Study 1 indicate that this counterpublic perception has been adopted by right-wing oriented individuals and comes into play, for instance, when news reporting does not correspond with activated racist stereotypes. Accordingly, the experimental investigation found that news articles, which did not refer to criminals as foreign citizens, were perceived as less credible. This effect was mediated by the suspicion that perpetrators' migrant backgrounds were deliberately disguised. In the end, this cognitive response puts alternative right-wing media in a competitive advantage over mainstream media, as in right-wing counterpublic discourse of the former, migrant backgrounds of criminals are emphasized whenever they remotely exist. Study 2 investigated the effect of the right-wing counterpublic narrative on news audiences when applied by commenters in comment sections. The findings showed that being exposed to user comments that accused mainstream media of deliberately excluding information that is unfavorable to immigration and trying to silence dissenters increased like-minded individuals' willingness to speak out. Moreover, among participants with low media trust concerning the issue of immigration, the narrative in user comments appeared to trigger a feeling of group belonging, which made them feel socially supported and more powerful. Lastly, instead of investigating individuals' interactions with a specific right-wing

counterpublic narrative, Study 3 examined the effects of user comments that counter the dominant discourse of mainstream media on various fictional issues. In this context, it was of particular interest whether individuals with very low media trust – who in Germany are prevalently right-wing populist individuals – would assess user comments with alternative views more positively in terms of credibility and argument quality than user comments with media-congruent views (Study 3). Overall, the study found that individuals with low media trust did not inherently prefer user comments with such feature of counterpublic discourse. However, in contrast to media-trusting individuals, they did neither assess user comments with alternative views as worse than user comments with media-congruent views. Consequently, the findings indicate that the lower the individuals' media trust, the greater the general openness toward counterpublic discourse.

## **5.2. Societal Implications**

Ultimately, the empirical findings allow assumptions about individual factors that may provide counterpublics with particularly fertile ground. Most of all, it appears as if the lower their media trust, the more likely individuals are to support online content – be it news articles or user-generated content – that contains features of counterpublic discourse. In particular, with regard to right-wing counterpublics, low levels of media trust concerning the issue of immigration can be a driver of counterpublic discourse. In this light, the low levels of media trust concerning the issue of immigration within large parts of the population is troubling: Only approximately 25% of Germans says that they trust the mainstream media's coverage on this issue (Blöbaum, 2018; Jakob, Schultz, et al., 2019). Moreover, almost half of the population believes that political correctness in the dominant discourse is exaggerated, and even more feel like they have to be overly cautious when expressing their opinion (Köcher, 2019). The right-wing counterpublic narrative may, thus, resonate with a large part of the population and partly explain why right-wing counterpublics are so prevalent in the digital space.

Moreover, the empirical findings have several implications for the potential of public discourse between members of the mainstream public and members of counterpublics. While perspectives on public discourse vary in terms of underlying democracy theories (Ferree et al., 2002; Wessler, 2018), communication science usually draws on deliberative democracy theory. From the perspective of deliberative democracy theory, the ideal public discourse is a rational exchange of different arguments and views with the intent to make consensual and reasonable collective decisions that most adequately serve the common good (Chambers, 2003; Habermas, 1984; Kim & Kim, 2008; Scheufele, 1999). While numerous scholars have questioned whether reaching consensus is, in fact, a realistic aim (Caluwaerts & Deschouwer, 2014; Chambers, 2003; Fraser, 1990; Levine et al., 2005; Mouffe, 1999; Niemeyer & Dryzek, 2007), it is beyond dispute that public deliberation should increase the awareness of other perspectives' rationales and encourage participants to examine issues from different angles (Chambers, 2003; Guttman, 2012; Mutz, 2006; Stromer-Galley, 2007).

A basic premise for such constructive public deliberation is that participants trust that what other participants are saying is truthful as, only in this case, will they be willing to consider other participants' arguments. For this purpose, arguments and views in public debates need to be put forward with references to external sources as claims based on personal experiences are hard to verify and to contest (Stromer-Galley, 2007). Yet, as the empirical findings indicate, the assessment of what constitutes credible content strongly depends on individuals' pre-existing attitudes and media trust levels, which make external references no suitable means for deliberative debates. This lack of a mutually accepted communicative authority is likely to hamper the rapprochement between the different viewpoints of the mainstream public and counterpublics. Yet, as Haller and Holt (2019) found, even the right-wing populist movement PEGIDA uses mainstream media to prove its political positions whenever appropriate.

However, to opportunistically accept mainstream media as a communicative authority whenever it serves one's arguments has little value for deliberative exchanges.

Lastly, the empirical findings indicate that attacks on journalists and harsh media criticism, which is a common feature of right-wing counterpublic discourse, are likely to bring counterpublic members' social identity to the psychological forefront. According to social identity theory, individuals have multiple social identities and flexibly categorize themselves into the one that seems relevant in a given context (Turner, 2010). In particular, with regard to the conflict between two social groups, in this case, mainstream media versus the counterpublic, social identity salience is likely to increase (see Kaiser & Rauchfleisch, 2019; Tajfel & Turner, 2004). While the findings indicate that salience of social identity may increase counterpublic-minded individuals' willingness to speak out, further consequences for public deliberation are likely. Empirical studies have, for instance, shown that strong social identities can have negative effects on meaningful cross deliberation by, for instance, decreasing tolerance and the willingness to understand the rationale of other perspectives (Mutz, 2006; Strickler, 2018) or by lowering the general belief in public deliberation (Hwang et al., 2014).

Overall, the various impediments that may emerge with regard to public deliberation are not least problematic as social cohesion – characterized by emotional attachment to the society one lives in and the orientation toward finding the common good (Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017) – depends on societies' ability to mediate peacefully and constructively between different viewpoints (Robinson, 2018). Even regarding highly controversial and moral issues, public discourse can potentially reduce intergroup conflicts, increase the tolerance of opponents' viewpoints, and potentially depolarize tense political environments (Dryzek, 2005; Mendelberg, 2002; O'Flynn, 2006). Thus, if there is no stable ground for public deliberation, social cohesion will rest on unsteady foundations as well.

### **5.3. Future Research**

Eventually, the research question that was posed at the beginning of this thesis opens the door for a wide range of possible research projects. For instance, the empirical studies of this Ph.D. thesis were concerned with narratives that are specific to right-wing counterpublic discourse. Yet, the general expression that one's views are discriminated by mainstream media is common for other counterpublics as well (e.g., Choi & Cho, 2017; Eckert & Chadha, 2013; Marchi & Clark, 2018). Scholars could, thus, analyze how the narratives with regard to exclusion differ among counterpublics and whether they trigger similar effects among those who have low media trust concerning the respective issue. Moreover, future research could explore other effects that counterpublic discourse may trigger. In public debates, the “us vs. mainstream media” rhetoric could, for instance, be disruptive as it distracts the audiences from the actual news stories, leads discussions off-topic, and causes the emergence of pre-existing frames about news reporting for those with low media trust (Carlson, 2009).

Furthermore, scholars could examine in greater depth how counterpublic discourse fosters social identities and the various impacts these social identities may have on individuals' cognition and behavior. In this context, one particularly promising and fundamental step for future research on individuals' interaction with counterpublic discourse would be to develop and validate a counterpublic identity scale. This scale should capture both the feeling of exclusion from the mainstream discourse and the social identification with a virtual community. A counterpublic identity scale could be useful to investigate not only right-wing but also other counterpublics, such as the current anti-corona movements. Eventually, a deeper understanding of counterpublic identity and its effects on counterpublic discourse will also expand our knowledge about the fragmented and polarized public discourse of our time.

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## 7. Appendix

### 7.1. List of Papers

- Study 1: Kunst, M. (2021). “References to Nationality in Crime Reporting: Effects on Perceived News Credibility and the Moderating Role of Xenophobia”. Accepted at the International Communication Association Annual Conference, Division: Political Communication, May 27 to 31, 2021, Virtual Conference. The ICA manuscript is attached; a revised manuscript will be published at *Studies in Communication and Media (SCM)*.
- Study 2: Kunst, M., Toepfl, F., & Dogruel, L. (2020). Spirals of Speaking Out? Effects of the “Suppressed Voice Rhetoric” on Audiences’ Willingness to Express Their Opinion. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media*, 64(3), 397–417.  
<https://doi.org/10.1080/08838151.2020.1796390>.
- Study 3: Kunst, M. (2020). Assessments of User Comments With “Alternative Views” as a Function of Media Trust. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications*, 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1027/1864-1105/a000287>.

**7.2. Study 1 (ICA manuscript)****References to Nationality in Crime Reporting:****Effects on Perceived News Credibility and the Moderating Role of Xenophobia****Abstract**

In many Western countries, right-wing populists have accused mainstream media of disguising criminals' foreign origins for the sake of political correctness. To avert a loss in credibility among certain audience segments, an increasing number of news media have therefore made it their policy to always report the nationality of perpetrators. Yet, whether references to nationality or the absence thereof affect credibility perceptions among audiences has not been empirically established. A between-subjects experimental study (N = 261) was conducted in Germany to fill this gap. The findings show that the effect of references to nationality on credibility perceptions depends substantially on news consumers' pre-existing social attitudes. Among xenophobic participants, references to perpetrators as foreign citizens enhanced perceptions of media credibility and decreased feelings of being deceived; the opposite tended to be true for participants with low xenophobia. Practical implications for news practitioners and avenues for future research are discussed.

Keywords: Credibility, Experiment, News Media, Stereotype, Xenophobia

Words: 7033

In several European countries, such as Germany, Austria or Sweden, the question of whether news media should inform the public about the nationality of criminals is controversial (Brown, 2016; Semenova, 2017; Herczeg & Pöttker, 2018). In this strongly polarized debate, one camp argues that a perpetrator's nationality is irrelevant information that only fosters the stigmatization of ethnic minorities. The other camp insists that news media should not withhold information but let audience members decide for themselves what information they consider essential. Right-wing populists in particular have sparked the debate by consistently accusing the news media of deliberately deceiving the public (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Haller & Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018). According to their narrative, the mainstream media censor information about the foreign backgrounds of criminals to prevent public sentiments that would disrupt the journalists' immigration-friendly agenda (Haller & Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018).

Meanwhile, right-wing alternative media have made it their unique selling point to always name the nationality of perpetrators (Holt, 2019). Mainstream news media may feel pressured to adopt this practice to offset the alternative media's competitive advantage and avoid losing credibility due to censorship allegations from segments of the public (Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018). Yet, so far, the media's approach to the challenge of a potential loss in credibility has been inconsistent. While some still refuse to name a perpetrator's nationality out of ethical concerns, others do so whenever they consider the nationality necessary to understand the incident. Still others have decided to always name the nationality of perpetrators, regardless of whether it is foreign or domestic.

However, while proponents assume that providing references to nationality will diminish the mainstream news media's credibility problems, this effect has been neither empirically supported nor investigated. The lack of scholarly attention can likely be explained by the fact that the debate has only gained momentum in recent years due to the rise of right-wing populism and increasing pressures on mainstream media from right-leaning users in the

digital public sphere. The aim of this study is, therefore, to help fill this gap by providing first empirical evidence. Hence, a web-based survey experiment was conducted to investigate how the presentation of perpetrators' nationalities affects audience members' credibility perceptions toward crime-related news. In addition, the experiment tested whether such effects would be moderated by individuals' pre-existing degree of xenophobia.

### **Attitude Congruency and Perceived News Credibility**

News credibility is commonly considered a multidimensional construct that consists of individuals' subjective evaluations concerning, for instance, the completeness, objectivity, and accuracy of news (Appelman & Sundar, 2016; Kohring & Matthes, 2007; Molyneux & Coddington, 2019). Generally, credibility judgments are based on both external factors, such as a recognizable news brand, and internal factors that are embedded in the message itself (Molyneux & Coddington, 2019; Porlezza & Russ-Mohl, 2013). However, particularly in the jungle of online news, individuals are likely to encounter multiple unknown news sources and are, in these cases, more inclined to base their judgments on internal content factors. Moreover, individuals will, over time, update their credibility perceptions toward reputable news brands depending on how they perceive their content (Appelman & Sundar, 2016). Therefore, it is essential for journalists of reputable news brands to produce content that is perceived as credible in the eyes of their audience members.

In this context, a range of studies in the field of motivated reasoning and other research traditions, such as cognitive dissonance, selective exposure, and confirmation bias, have indicated that individuals tend to perceive attitude-incongruent information as less credible than attitude-congruent information (Fischer et al., 2005; Kuru et al., 2017; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger et al., 2020; Nickerson, 1998; Oyedele, 2010). According to the theories of motivated reasoning and confirmation bias, this effect can be explained by the human tendency to seek and interpret information in accordance with desired conclusions (Kunda,

1990; Nickerson, 1998). Information that does not correspond to pre-existing attitudes, thus, tends to be scrutinized more critically and is more likely to be discredited than information that confirms pre-existing attitudes (Ditto & Lopez, 1992; Edwards & Smith, 1996; Kuru et al., 2017). Even in cases where assessments of credibility are based on less effortful heuristic information processing, scholars have found that support for one's views and expectations generally lead to more favorable credibility judgments (Metzger et al., 2010).

It is, consequently, expected that people's evaluations regarding the credibility of crime-related news items will depend on how attitude-congruent individuals perceive these news items to be. In this regard, xenophobic individuals are likely to react differently to references to nationality than those with low degrees of xenophobia. This prediction is supported by the theoretical framework of chronically accessible racial stereotypes, as set forth below.

### **The Role of Xenophobia and Racial Stereotypes**

Group stereotypes consist of specific traits, behaviors, and circumstances that individuals associate with group members (Kunda, 1999). One of the most prevalent stereotypes about many ethnic minorities is that they are more aggressive and inclined toward criminality than members of the ethnic majority (Ceobanu, 2011; Hurwitz & Peffley, 1997; Simon & Sikich, 2007). Such mental associations between crime and ethnic minorities can, over time, become chronically accessible (Dixon, 2006, 2008; Dixon & Azocar, 2007). In these cases, the overlapping cues of the stereotype and the stimulus only need to be minimal to trigger activation (Andersen & Chen, 2002). Indeed, studies have shown that for individuals with chronically accessible racial stereotypes, exposure to a crime-related news item tends to be sufficient to activate their stereotypical perception that ethnic minority members are criminals and lead them to deem them responsible for the crime (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Schmuck et al., 2018).

Although the racial stereotype equating ethnic minority members with criminals is prevalent in many societies, the stereotype's strength, accessibility, and threshold for activation vary among individuals (Allen et al., 2009; Higgins, 2000). Those who generally feel threatened by immigration are likely to be more prejudiced against immigrants and hold stronger racial stereotypes than individuals who do not feel threatened (Stephan & Stephan, 2000). Moreover, due to selective exposure mechanisms and custom-tailored news feeds in today's digital news environments (van Aelst et al., 2017), such xenophobic individuals will be more frequently exposed to news that nourish their stereotypical perception of criminal ethnic minorities. The frequent exposure to stereotype-consistent news is, in turn, likely to not only reinforce pre-existing racial stereotypes but will, over time, also contribute to making them more chronically accessible (see Higgins, 2000).

Although probably to a lesser extent, individuals with low degrees of xenophobia may have also internalized the cultural stereotype that ethnic minorities are inclined to criminality (Devine, 1989; Greenwald et al., 2003). Nevertheless, because low-prejudiced individuals have decided that the negative racial stereotype is inadequate, they may intentionally inhibit stereotypical thinking whenever racial stereotypes are activated (Devine, 1989; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Consequently, these individuals tend to intentionally initiate non-prejudiced thinking to resolve the experienced conflict between the racial stereotype and their non-prejudiced views (Devine, 1989).

Ultimately, one can expect that crime-related news items will activate chronically accessible racial stereotypes among xenophobic individuals. Consequently, news items that refer to perpetrators as foreign citizens are likely to be perceived as more stereotype-consistent, more attitude-congruent, and, thus, more credible than news items that do not correspond to the racial stereotype of criminal foreigners. Such effects are unlikely for individuals with low degrees of xenophobic attitudes, because either racial stereotypes will not be activated or they will be intentionally suppressed. However, if these less xenophobic

individuals intentionally initiate non-prejudiced thinking, news items that support racial stereotypes may be perceived as less attitude-congruent and, thus, less credible than news items with unspecified perpetrators.

### **Suspected Deception**

Finally, when presented with stereotype-inconsistent news items, xenophobic individuals may not only discredit the news item as less credible but also engage in more active counterarguing about why the information is erroneous (Kunda, 1990; Taber & Lodge, 2006). Thereby, it is likely that individuals draw on arguments that circulate in the public debate. Right-wing populists provide such arguments by constantly accusing mainstream news media of deliberately disinforming, manipulating, and misleading the public (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Haller & Holt, 2019; Hameleers, 2020). In particular, concerning the issue of immigration, right-wing populists frequently claim that certain facts are deliberately censored because they violate the norms of political correctness (Fawzi, 2019; Haller & Holt, 2019; Mudde, 2004). This narrative may have been adopted by those who feel that journalists downplay the negative crime-related consequences of immigration (Beyer & Matthes, 2015; Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018). These individuals may suspect that journalists deliberately disguise information about perpetrators' migration background whenever news items do not correspond to the activated racial stereotype. This suspicion is, in turn, likely to lower the perceived credibility of the news and increase the perceived news bias, as it reflects the belief that journalists deliberately misrepresent reality. It is, thus, predicted that the suspicion of disguised information will mediate the effect of references to nationality on credibility perceptions. As xenophobia is expected to moderate the effect of references to nationality on suspicion of being deceived, this study sets out to test a moderated mediation model.

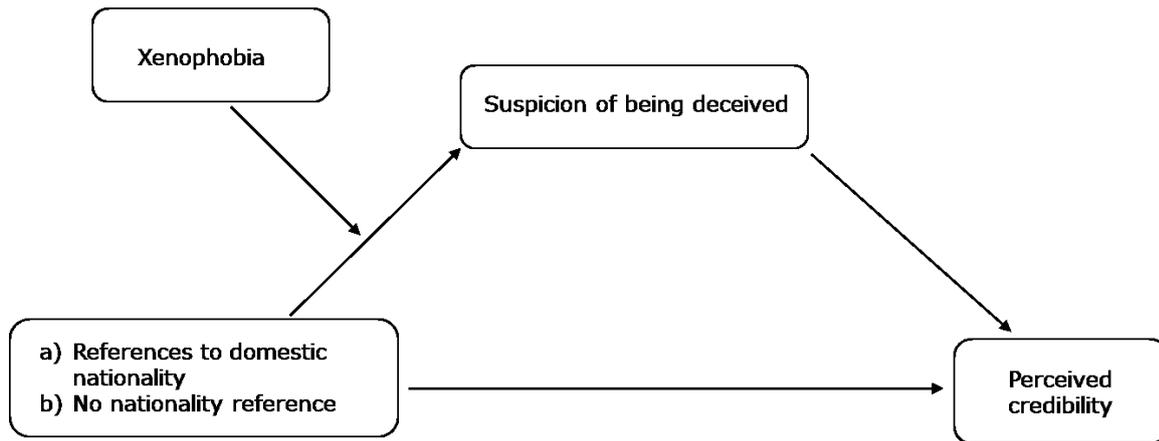


Figure 1: Moderated mediation model

### The Present Research

Previous research has primarily investigated the effects of crime-related news reporting on the stigmatization and stereotyping of ethnic minority groups. Most of these studies were conducted in the United States and focused on ethnicity cues based on skin color and their potential to foster prejudices toward ethnic minorities (e.g., Dixon, 2007, 2008; Domke, 2001). Despite these negative effects of ethnicity cues in crime-related news, omitting this information may also have unintended negative effects. Mainstream news media depend on being perceived as credible information sources to fulfill their socially relevant mission of informing the public (Porlezza & Russ-Mohl, 2013; van Dalen, 2019). If a growing number of audience members fundamentally question their credibility, it paves the way for a more polarized, misinformed, and fragmented society (van Dalen, 2019). Thus, understanding the factors that may cause segments of the public to reject mainstream news media is essential.

To fill this gap, the present research investigated how audience members' credibility perceptions of crime-related news items are affected when a news item references the perpetrator as a foreign citizen, when it references the perpetrator as a domestic citizen, and when it provides no reference to nationality. For this purpose, a web-based survey experiment

with a single-factor (foreign nationality reference vs. domestic nationality reference vs. no nationality reference), between-subjects design was run.

Using this design, the following hypotheses were tested:

H1: The stronger an individual's xenophobic attitudes, the higher the perceived credibility of crime-related news items with references to foreign nationality, compared to news items a) with references to domestic nationality or b) without references to nationality.

H2: The stronger the individual's xenophobic attitudes, the stronger the suspicion that news items deliberately disguise perpetrators' migrant backgrounds when there are a) references to domestic nationality or b) no references to nationality, compared to when there are references to foreign nationality.

H3: The suspicion of being deceived will be negatively associated with perceived credibility.

H4: The effects of H1 will be mediated by the suspicion of being deceived, which, in turn, will be moderated by xenophobic attitudes.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

For the experimental study, 261 participants were recruited. Each participant completed four trials, resulting in 1,044 trials. The sampling strategy applied quotas for gender, age, and education based on official statistics of the German population to draw a quasi-representative sample (female = 50%,  $M_{\text{age}} = 45.9$ ,  $SD = 18.57$ ). Approximately 35% of the participants had completed nine years of education, 30% had completed ten years, and 25% had completed at least 12 years. Data were collected with the commercial online access panel *Respondi* in Germany in March 2020.

### ***Procedure***

At the beginning of the web-based survey experiment, the participants were told that the study aimed to analyze the quality of news reporting about five different issues:

digitalization, crime, science, immigration, and the economy. Subsequently, they were asked about their attitudes toward these issues. Here, participants' levels of fear-based xenophobia were measured through questions about their stance on immigration. To disguise the focus of the study, the questions were presented as part of a larger set of filler questions concerning issues other than immigration. Participants were then told that the software would randomly assign them to one of the five issues. After a short break in which participants were exposed to an hourglass icon on their screens, participants were informed that their selected issue was crime and that they would now be presented with four crime-related news items. In each of the following four trials, participants were exposed to news items and were asked directly afterward to answer questions about the perceived credibility of the news items as well as feelings of suspicion of deception.

In random order, participants were presented with and responded to four different news items, instead of only one, to increase the generalizability of the findings. All four news items were drawn from online local newspapers but were shortened to prevent participant fatigue. The resulting length of each news item was approximately the same. The layout differed among them, and the name of the newspaper, dates, and location details were blurred. Each news item dealt with a criminal incident: a rape in a park, a violent fight between adolescents, rioting young men in a city, and two men using a machete to threaten a bouncer who did not permit them to enter his club (for each news item in the original German and English translations, see the appendix). The participants were exposed to each of the four news items in random order.

The news items were experimentally altered in so far as they either referred to the criminal(s) as having a) foreign nationality, b) domestic (German) nationality or c) provided no reference to nationality at all. Thus, the study applied a between-subjects, single-factor design with three levels (foreign nationality reference vs. domestic nationality reference vs. no nationality reference). Apart from the experimental alteration, the news items were

identical. In each of the four trials, participants were randomly assigned to one of the three conditions. Moreover, to control for the effect of different foreign nationalities, the news items randomly varied the group to which they referred (Afghan, “a North African citizenship,” Nigerian, Bulgarian). These nationalities were selected because they represent some of the most stigmatized ethnic minorities in Germany and are therefore likely to suffer from the racial stereotype of criminal foreigners.

At the end of the survey, the participants were debriefed. They were informed that this study aimed to analyze the effect of references to nationality on the credibility perceptions of news media. Second, it was emphasized that for this purpose, the nationalities named in relation to the crime were purely fictional and not based on reality.

### ***Measurements***

**Fear-based Xenophobia.** The moderator variable was measured with five items taken from the fear-based xenophobia scale by van der Veer et al. (2013). For each of the measurements in this study, the participants were asked to indicate their level of agreement with the particular items on a 7-point Likert scale, from 1 = *do not agree at all* to 7 = *completely agree*. The five items for fear-based xenophobia were as follows: “Immigration in this country is out of control,” “immigrants cause an increase in crime,” “with increased immigration I fear that our way of life will change for the worse,” “I doubt that immigrants will put the interest of this country first,” and “I am afraid that our own culture will be lost with an increase in immigration.” The five items were mean scored in an index with good internal consistency ( $M = 4.28$ ,  $SD = 1.71$ ,  $\alpha = 0.95$ ).

**Perceived News Credibility.** A scale used by Molyneux and Coddington (2019) was adopted to measure perceived news credibility. Participants were asked whether they agreed that the news item was “trustworthy,” “fair,” “informative,” “accurate,” “biased,” and

“opinionated,” as well as whether it “tells the whole story.” The seven items were mean scored, with  $M = 4.64$ ,  $SD = 1.46$ , and  $\alpha = 0.95$ .

**Perceived Deception.** One item measured the suspicion of being deceived: “I think that this news item deliberately disguises the fact that the perpetrators have a migrant background” ( $M = 2.71$ ,  $SD = 1.97$ ). The question was embedded in a block of multiple unrelated questions (e.g., “I think that this is fake news”) to disguise the importance of this item for the study.

### **Analysis**

The data analysis was conducted with the software R (version 3.6.2). It mainly applied the lme4-package developed by Bates et al. (2015) for mixed-effects models. The advantage of mixed-effects analysis is that it controls for correlated error structures (Singmann & Kellen, 2019). The four trials (Level 1) were nested within each participant (Level 2). The participants’ and news items’ intercepts, as well as the slopes for the experimental condition, were allowed to vary. R reported problems with convergence and singularity when adding random slopes. However, because effects only slightly changed compared to a fixed effects model, and mostly became more conservative, the random effects were kept in the model following the suggestion of Singmann and Kellen (2019).

In Step 1 of the analysis, for exploratory reasons, the main effects of the experimental conditions (foreign nationality, domestic nationality, no reference to nationality) and xenophobic attitudes on the dependent variables (perceived credibility, suspicion of being deceived) were investigated. Foreign nationality was applied as the reference category of the experimental conditions in order to be consistent with the hypothesis tests that were conducted in Step 2. All hypotheses predicted that the effects of references to foreign nationality would differ from effects of references to domestic nationality and no references to nationality, whereas there were no predicted different effects between references to domestic nationality and no references to nationality. Lastly, the analysis set out to test a moderated

mediation model in which the effect on suspicion of being deceived is moderated by xenophobia and mediates the effect of references to nationality on credibility perceptions.

## **Results**

### ***Step 1: Main Effects***

The findings of Step 1 showed that credibility perceptions did not significantly change when participants were presented with news items that referred to the perpetrators as domestic citizens or provided no reference to nationality, compared to when they were presented with news items that referred to the perpetrators as foreign citizens (see Table 1, Step 1). Neither did the participants' suspicions of being deceived significantly increase when the news item referred to perpetrators as domestic citizens, compared to when it referred to perpetrators as foreign citizens (see Table 1, Step 1). However, when providing no nationality reference at all, the perceptions of being deceived increased significantly compared to when the perpetrator was references as a foreign citizen (see Table 1, Step 1).

INSERT TABLE 1 HERE

### ***Step 2: Cross-level Interactions (H1-H3)***

H1–H2 were tested in Step 2. For this purpose, cross-level two-way interactions between the experimental conditions (Level 1) and xenophobic attitudes (Level 2) were added to the analysis. H1 predicted that the stronger the individuals' xenophobic attitudes, the more credible they would perceive news items with references to foreign nationality, compared to a) news items with references to domestic nationality or b) news items without references to nationality. The findings showed that xenophobic attitudes significantly moderated both the effect of references to domestic nationality and the effect of no references to nationality on perceived credibility (see Table 1, Step 2). For a more nuanced understanding of this finding, the interaction has been illustrated in Figure 2, Panel A. Additionally, the least-square means of perceived credibility were contrasted separately for participants with weak (1.5 standard deviation below the mean, corresponding to 1.72) and strong (1.5 standard deviations above

the mean, corresponding to 6.85) xenophobic attitudes. The findings showed that participants with weak xenophobic attitudes perceived news items with references to domestic nationality,  $M = 4.70$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ;  $t(16.1) = 3.95$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = 0.35$ , as well as those without references to nationality,  $M = 4.68$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ;  $t(35) = 4.01$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 0.34$ , as significantly more credible than news items with references to foreign nationality,  $M = 4.09$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ . For participants with strong xenophobic attitudes, the effects were reversed. These participants perceived news items with references to domestic nationality,  $M = 4.57$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ;  $t(17.2) = -3.45$ ,  $p = .008$ ,  $d = -0.32$ , and those with no references to nationality,  $M = 4.59$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ ;  $t(30.7) = -3.66$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d = -0.30$ , as significantly less credible than news items with references to foreign nationality,  $M = 5.11$ ,  $SE = 0.17$ . Thus, H1a and H1b were supported.

INSERT FIGURE 2 HERE

H2 proposed that the stronger individuals' xenophobia, the more individuals would suspect that news items a) with references to domestic nationality or b) without references to nationality deliberately disguised information about the perpetrator's migrant background, compared to news items with references to foreign nationality. Again, xenophobic attitudes significantly moderated the effects (Table 1, Step 2). The data, thus, supported H2a and H2b. The results of lsmeans contrasting showed that for participants with weak xenophobic attitudes, the perception of being deliberately deceived did not significantly differ when they were exposed to news items with references to domestic nationality,  $M = 1.42$ ,  $SE = 0.24$ ;  $t(14.4) = -0.96$ ,  $p = .613$ ,  $d = -0.23$ , or without references to nationality,  $M = 1.60$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ;  $t(65) = -0.30$ ,  $p = .940$ ,  $d = -0.07$ , compared to news items with references to foreign nationality,  $M = 1.68$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ . In contrast, for participants with strong xenophobic attitudes, the perception of being deceived significantly increased when they were exposed to news items with references to domestic nationality,  $M = 4.05$ ,  $SE = 0.25$ ;  $t(15) = 3.98$ ,  $p = .003$ ,  $d =$

0.97, and without reference to nationality,  $M = 4.55$ ,  $SE = 0.20$ ;  $t(58.3) = 6.85$ ,  $p < .001$ ,  $d = 1.40$ , compared to news items with references to foreign nationality,  $M = 2.93$ ,  $SE = 0.19$ .

#### ***Moderated Mediation Analysis (H3-H4)***

Lastly, the suspicion of being deceived was expected to mediate the effects of references to domestic nationality and no references to nationality on perceived credibility (H4). Accordingly, it was assumed that suspicion of being deceived would be negatively associated with news credibility (H3). These assumptions were supported by the data: When controlling for the effects of the experimental conditions, the suspicion of being deceived was negatively associated with perceived news credibility,  $B = -0.09$ ,  $SE = 0.02$ ,  $p < .001$ .

To investigate H4, indirect effects were tested separately for weak and strong xenophobia. Confidence intervals were calculated with a macro for Bayesian statistics of multilevel mediation, provided and validated by Falk and Biesanz (2016). The results showed that for individuals with weak xenophobia, the suspicion of being deceived did not significantly mediate the effects of references to domestic nationality or no references to nationality on perceived credibility (see Table 2). In contrast, for participants with strong xenophobia, the suspicion of being deceived significantly mediated the effects of both references to domestic nationality and no references to nationality on perceived credibility (see Table 2).

#### **Discussion**

Whether news media should inform the public about the nationality of criminals, has become a controversial issue in many Western countries (Brown, 2016; Semenova, 2017; Herczeg & Pöttker, 2018). First and foremost, the heated debate has been sparked by right-wing populists, who constantly accuse mainstream media of deceiving the public by deliberately disguising the migrant backgrounds of perpetrators (Haller & Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018). This narrative is likely to fall on fertile ground among the considerable numbers of Western audience members who believe that mainstream media downplay the

negative crime-related consequences of immigration (Beyer & Matthes, 2015; Holt, 2019; Krämer, 2018). Hence, to prevent the loss of credibility, it has been suggested that journalists should always inform the audience about the nationality of criminals—be it domestic or foreign. However, whether this strategy will enhance the audience's credibility perceptions has been untested. The present research provides first evidence on this issue.

Participants with average levels of xenophobia were rarely affected by whether news items provided references to nationality or by what kind of references they provided. However, in support of the hypotheses, the results suggest that the effects of references to nationality, or the absence thereof, depend on the strength of an individual's xenophobic attitudes. Participants with strong xenophobic attitudes perceived crime-related news items with references to foreign nationality as more credible than news items with references to domestic nationality or without references to nationality. This effects can be explained by the individual's chronically accessible racial stereotype, which becomes activated when the individual is exposed to crime-related news. In other words, strongly xenophobic individuals automatically associate delinquency with ethnic minorities and, thus, deem them responsible for the crime. Subsequently, information that is inconsistent with the racial stereotype of foreign criminals is more likely to be discredited and perceived by xenophobic individuals as biased against their views. Overall, these findings largely correspond to research on chronically accessible stereotype activation (Dixon & Azocar, 2007; Schmuck et al., 2018) and cognitive information processing (Fischer et al., 2005; Kuru et al., 2017; Metzger et al., 2010; Metzger et al., 2020; Nickerson, 1998; Oyedeji, 2010).

Moreover, the findings indicate that when exposed to stereotype-inconsistent content, strongly xenophobic individuals tend to assume that the news items deliberately disguise information about the criminals' migrant backgrounds. Hence, strongly xenophobic individuals seem to have adopted the right-wing populist narrative of dishonest and manipulative mainstream media (Fawzi, 2019; Mudde, 2004). This narrative seems to find

nourishment from news items with references to domestic nationality or without references to nationality. This, in turn, tends to diminish credibility perceptions: The more the participants felt deceived, the less credible they perceived the news item to be. The fact that they felt just as deceived by news items with references to domestic nationality as by news items without references to nationality indicates that information about perpetrators' migrant backgrounds may be of greater interest to strongly xenophobic individuals than information about nationality.

For participants with low degrees of xenophobia, the effects were generally reversed. These individuals perceived news items with references to foreign nationality as significantly less credible than news items with references to domestic nationality or without references to nationality. This finding supports the assumption that when presented with references to foreign nationality, participants with low degrees of xenophobia may intentionally have activated their non-prejudiced views while deliberately inhibiting stereotypical thinking (Devine, 1989; Gawronski & Bodenhausen, 2006). Due to this mechanism, these participants may have discredited news items with references to foreign nationality because they reject the racial stereotype it presents. It is, however, also possible that no racial stereotype was activated and that these participants generally discredit news items with references to foreign nationality because they expect them to foster stereotypes and stigmatization among the public. Moreover, individuals with weak xenophobia may have assumed that news items with references to foreign nationality were more likely to come from right-wing alternative media sources, which they probably automatically associate with low credibility.

### **Contribution and Implications**

First and foremost, this study adds a crucial aspect to the literature that has, to this point, focused on the effects of ethnic cues in crime-related news reporting on the stigmatization of ethnic minorities (e.g. Dixon, 2007, 2008; Domke, 2001). Moreover, by investigating how stereotype activation and cognitive information processing influence

credibility perceptions of news audiences, this study has shed light on some of the mechanisms that may cause individuals to reject mainstream media. Although scholars have started to address the conflict-laden relationship between right-wing leaning individuals and mainstream media (Egelhofer & Lecheler, 2019; Fawzi, 2019), more studies are necessary to understand the role of specific media content.

For media practitioners, the findings of this study are rather concerning. They cannot please their entire audience: The choices that enhance credibility perceptions for strongly xenophobic individuals appear to diminish credibility perceptions for weakly xenophobic individuals. Moreover, an editorial policy that always provides references to nationality, regardless of whether the individuals are of domestic or foreign origin, is also unlikely to be rewarded by the entire audience. Instead, xenophobic individuals tend to suspect news items that disguise the perpetrator's migrant background if it refers to the perpetrator as a domestic national. Thus, xenophobic individuals seem to perceive information about the ethnic backgrounds of perpetrators as more relevant and transparent information than their national citizenship, which contradicts the views of most in the mainstream media. In addition to these challenges, journalists are likely to have ethical concerns with regard to references to nationality in crime-reporting, because of their potential to foster stigmatization and prejudices. This being said, news media will need to cautiously balance the risk of fostering stereotypes against the risk of losing credibility when making concrete decisions about how to deal with references to nationality in crime reporting.

Lastly, this study's findings have implications for the societal trend toward polarization. If strongly xenophobic individuals perceive media that report about foreign criminals as generally more credible, they may increasingly turn to alternative right-wing media that nurture these racial stereotypes. These developments diminish the mainstream news media's ability to "unite the public under one regime of 'objective' truth" (Broersma, 2013, p. 44) and may drive society further apart. Even if mainstream news media decide to

always provide references to nationality, xenophobic individuals will feel deceived and less credible if the nationality is not foreign but domestic. Right-wing alternative media are likely to benefit from these psychological responses; these media tend to not only overemphasize the criminal activities of ethnic minority members in comparison to domestic majority members but also inform about migrant roots even when perpetrators hold domestic citizenship.

### **Limitations and Future Research**

As with any study, this one comes with limitations. First of all, the multiple trials may have caused some spill-over effects. It is, for instance, possible that racial stereotypes may have been activated through a news item with references to foreign nationality and remained activated or more easily accessible during the subsequent trials. However, both the order of the news items and the assignments to the different experimental conditions were randomized to mitigate this concern.

Second, news media's credibility is particularly likely to suffer if they do not inform the audience about a perpetrator's foreign nationality, as this information is perceived as relevant by large segments of the audience. This was the case with the sexual assaults against women on New Year's Eve 2015 in Cologne (Herczeg & Pöttker, 2018). In the wake of these incidents, German news media were sharply criticized and questioned. For smaller and less exceptional crimes, such public outrage is unlikely but may still occur in right-wing echo chambers. The effects of such aftermaths would undoubtedly be worth exploring.

Third and last, some have argued that one reason why news media should always name a perpetrator's nationality is because if they do not, users will start to speculate and spread false rumors online. The findings of this study suggest that strongly xenophobic individuals as well as individuals with medium degrees of xenophobia may be particularly susceptible to these kinds of user-generated content. If one suspects the media of disguising information about a perpetrator's migrant background, one is probably prone to believe sources that claim that the perpetrator was a foreigner. Thus, accounting for the role of user-

generated content when investigating the impact of references to nationality would be another promising avenue of future research.

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**Table 1**

*Fixed Effects of Experimental Conditions and Xenophobic Attitudes on the Dependent Variables*

	DV: Perceived News Credibility				DV: Suspected Deception			
	<i>B</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>B</i>	<i>d</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
<b>Step 1</b>								
Intercept	4.37	5.33	0.22	< .001	0.50	0.43	0.23	.034
Domestic nationality <sup>a</sup>	0.03	0.04	0.10	.678	0.43	0.37	0.20	.071
No nationality <sup>a</sup>	0.02	0.02	0.09	.855	0.79	0.68	0.14	< .001
Xenophobic attitudes	0.06	0.07	0.04	.195	0.42	0.36	0.05	< .001
<b>Step 2</b>								
Intercept	3.75	4.57	0.24	< .001	1.26	1.09	0.29	< .001
Domestic nationality <sup>a</sup>	1.00	1.22	0.22	< .001	-0.73	-0.63	0.37	.058
No nationality <sup>a</sup>	0.96	1.17	0.22	< .001	-0.65	-0.56	0.36	.070
Xenophobic attitudes	0.20	0.24	0.05	< .001	0.24	0.21	0.06	< .001
<b>Domestic nationality<sup>a</sup> x xenophobic attitudes</b>	<b>-0.22</b>	<b>-0.27</b>	<b>0.04</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>	<b>0.27</b>	<b>0.23</b>	<b>0.07</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
<b>No nationality<sup>a</sup> x xenophobic attitudes</b>	<b>-0.22</b>	<b>-0.27</b>	<b>0.05</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>	<b>0.33</b>	<b>0.28</b>	<b>0.08</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>

Note. N = 261.

<sup>a</sup> Reference group: foreign nationality

**Table 2**

*Conditional Indirect Effects of the Experimental Conditions on News Credibility, Mediated by Suspicion of being Deceived*

	Weak Xenophobia (1.5 SD below $M$ ) <sup>a</sup>			Strong Xenophobia (1.5 SD above $M$ ) <sup>b</sup>		
	95% CI					
	b	LL	UL	b	LL	UL
Domestic nationality references <sup>a</sup> -> suspicion of being deceived -> perceived news credibility	0.03	-0.03	0.09	-0.10	-0.18	-0.04
No nationality references <sup>a</sup> -> suspicion of being deceived -> perceived news credibility	0.01	-0.04	0.06	-0.14	-0.23	-0.07

*Note.* N = 261. CI = confidence interval; LL = lower limit; UL = upper limit.

<sup>a</sup> Reference category: foreign nationality reference

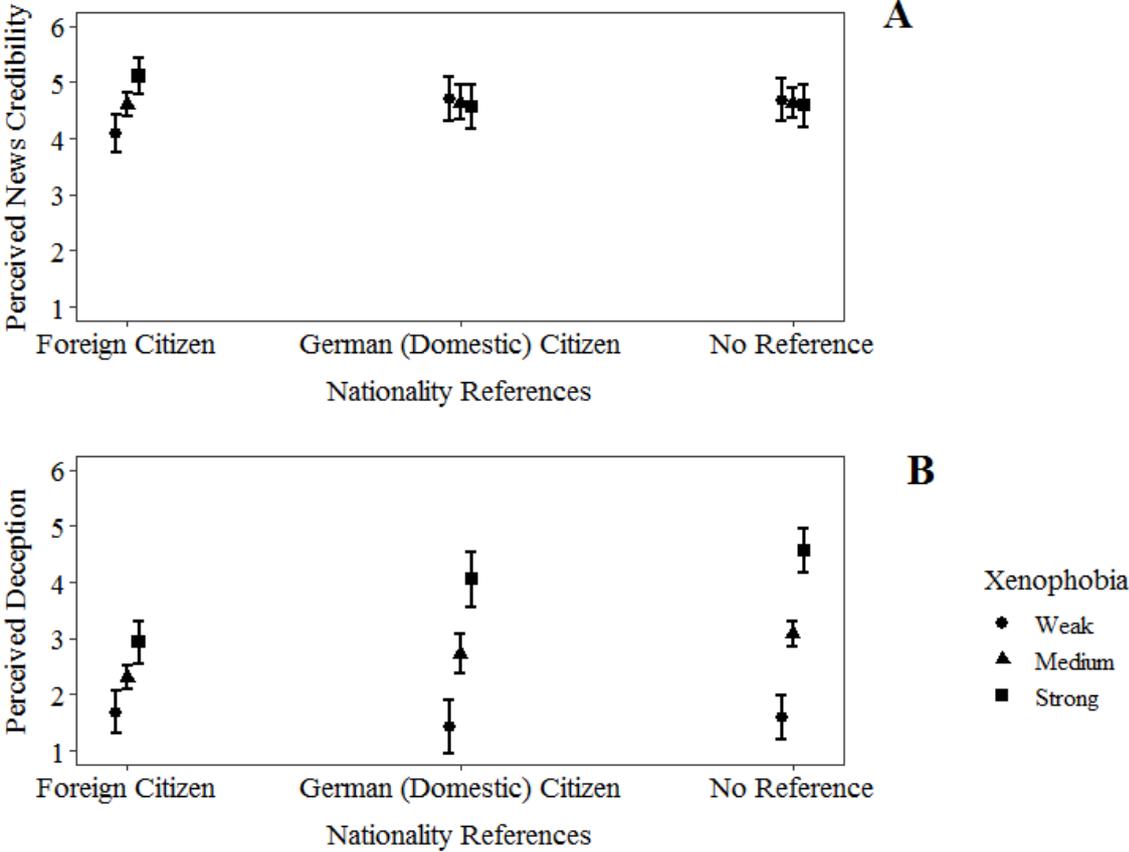


Figure 2: Interaction effects of experimental conditions and fear-based xenophobia on perceived credibility and perceived deception. Note. Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals. Levels of xenophobia correspond to 1.5 SD below the mean (weak) and mean (medium), and 1.5 SD above the mean (strong) on xenophobia.