# Social Media and Citizens' Role in Politics
## Exploring Relational and Contextual Aspects of Citizenship Norms

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**DEDICATION**

*To my grandma Bajka*

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## SUMMARY

The emergence of social media platforms has expanded citizens' participation in political communication. However, access to political discourse through social media has brought problems such as incivility and misinformation, where citizens can be both perpetrators and victims. Thus, it is important to understand how citizens perceive appropriate and desirable political behavior on social media ("good citizenship"), what they expect of themselves and others in this regard (citizenship norms), and how this informs their behavior. To do this, we must consider how social media have changed the conditions of political participation. First, political practices on social media are embedded in other everyday practices and have an interpersonal and interactional character. Second, social media platforms shape users' experiences of political discourse, for example, by affording visibility of social interaction. In consequence, if we are to understand the nature of citizenship on social media platforms, we need to integrate social contexts into participation research. Accordingly, this thesis reapproaches citizenship norms as embedded in intersecting social and political contexts and interpersonal relations and investigates *how platformized social experiences influence the formation of citizenship norms and notions of "good citizenship."*

Across the three empirical studies, I examine how contextual circumstances of social interaction shape citizenship norms and "good citizenship." Study 1 compares how social media users experience distinct *national information environments* and implications for ideals and norms related to informing oneself on social media. Study 2 examines how citizens' identification with *social groups* shapes ideas about "good" political self-expression and political self-expression as a citizenship norm. Study 3 investigates the role of *platform environments* and *social heuristics* for users' expectations related to the enforcement of civility norms (i.e., sanctioning incivility). These studies demonstrate that citizenship norms on social media platforms are defined through the process of defining and maintaining boundaries related to territory and relationships with others. The findings allow me to extend the traditional approach to citizenship norms by adding a social layer to it and formulating an integrative research agenda.

## ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Aufstieg von von Social-Media-Plattformen hat die Möglichkeiten der Bürger:innenbeteiligung an politischer Kommunikation erweitert. Der Zugang zum politischen Diskurs hat aber auch Probleme wie Inzivilität und Desinformation mit sich gebracht, bei denen Bürger:innen sowohl Täter als auch Opfer sein können. Daher ist es wichtig zu verstehen, wie Bürger:innen angemessenes und wünschenswertes politisches Verhalten in sozialen Medien wahrnehmen ("good citizenship"), was sie von sich selbst und anderen in dieser Hinsicht erwarten (Bürgernormen) und wie dies ihr Verhalten beeinflusst. In diesem Kontext stellt sich die Frage, wie soziale Medien die Bedingungen politischer Beteiligung verändert haben. Erstens sind politische Praktiken in sozialen Medien in andere Alltagspraktiken eingebettet und haben einen interpersonellen und interaktionellen Charakter. Zweitens prägen Social-Media-Plattformen die Erfahrungen von Nutzer:innen im politischen Diskurs, indem sie beispielsweise die Sichtbarkeit sozialer Interaktion ermöglichen. Um also politische Partizipation auf sozialen Medienplattformen zu verstehen, gilt es, soziale Kontexte in die Partizipationsforschung zu integrieren. Dementsprechend beschäftigt sich diese Arbeit mit der Einbettung von Bürgernormen in sich überschneidende soziale und politische Kontexte und zwischenmenschliche Beziehungen und untersucht, *wie plattformbasierte soziale Erfahrungen die Herausbildung von Bürgernormen und „good citizenship“ beeinflussen*.

In den drei empirischen Studien analysiert diese Arbeit, wie kontextuelle Umstände sozialer Interaktion Bürgernormen und "good citizenship" formen. Studie 1 vergleicht, wie Nutzer:innen sozialer Medien unterschiedliche *nationale Informationsumgebungen* erleben und welche Auswirkungen dies auf Ideale und Normen bzgl. des Informationsverhaltens in sozialen Medien hat. Studie 2 untersucht, wie die Identifikation mit *sozialen Gruppen* die Vorstellungen von "guter" politischer Meinungsäußerung und politischer Meinungsäußerung als Bürgernorm prägt. Studie 3 untersucht die Rolle von *Plattformumgebungen* und *sozialen Heuristiken* für die Erwartungen der Nutzer:innen in Bezug auf die Durchsetzung von Zivilität (d.h. die Sanktionierung von Inzivilität). Zusammengenommen zeigen diese Studien, dass Bürgernormen auf Social-Media-Plattformen durch den Prozess der räumlichen und interpersonalen Grenzziehung definiert werde. Die Ergebnisse tragen dazu bei, den traditionellen Ansatz um eine soziale Ebene zu erweitern und eine integrative Forschungsagenda für Bürgernormen zu formulieren.

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# INTRODUCTION

Digitalization of the media environment has changed conditions for the political participation of ordinary citizens. In the age of mass media, citizens learned about legitimate and desirable political behavior, i.e. "good citizenship," in conditions crucially shaped by their national political and media environment (de Vreese & Möller, 2014; Sigel, 1965). Political socialization of citizens into shared understanding about values, norms, and traditions is central to sustaining a political system (Sigel, 1965; de Vreese & Möller, 2014), so traditional civic duties include casting a ballot and keeping informed (Delli Carpini, 2000; Schudson, 1999). In turn, this shaped people's expectations of themselves and others concerning their role in politics—their citizenship norms (Almond & Verba, 1963; Sigel, 1965). In the past two decades, and with the emergence of social media platforms, citizens' participation expanded from the occasional voting or demonstrating to everyday communicative (inter)action, such as information sharing, self-expression, and informal political talk on social media platforms. In turn, this also changed the conditions in which citizens learn about "good citizenship" and citizenship norms.

Though early debates about a decline in norms related to traditional participation forms like voting, and accordingly, democratic decline, have been relativized by subsequent research (Emmer et al., 2021; Lane, 2020; Thorson, 2015), the broadened access to the political discourse through social media platforms has been posing other issues for democracies. Specifically, recent debates about political participation have revolved around the rise in incivility, junk content, "fake news" on social media platforms, and the effects of social media use on polarization (Carlson, 2020; Chadwick, 2019; Lorenz-Spreen et al., 2022; M. L. Miller & Vaccari, 2020). Since citizens are among the main actors in this story of digital dangers to democracy, it is important to understand how they perceive desirable and appropriate political behavior on social media platforms, and what they expect of themselves and others in this regard. To comprehend where images of "good citizenship" and citizenship norms in the domain of social media platforms come from, we need to consider how social media have altered the conditions of political socialization.

First, political practices situated on and enabled by social media platforms follow a different logic than traditional forms of participation, since they are embedded in everyday practices and have a decisively social—i.e., interpersonal and interactional—character.

Further, not only do social media platforms live off users' interaction but the experiences of individuals on social media platforms are largely co-shaped by the behavior of other users. Our initial study showed that people were foremostly concerned with the quality of the public discourse and their role in shaping these environments with their actions (Gagrčin et al., 2022). This means that social media platforms have shifted the reference point of certain norms – from institutions (legitimizing them through voting, challenging them through demonstrating) to (inter)action in the public discourse afforded by these platforms.

Second, social media platforms as sociotechnical environments shape how users come to experience political discourse on these platforms, and what kind of (inter)action is possible therein (Nagy & Neff, 2015). For example, users experience communication in social media platforms environments in form of algorithmically enabled information flows (Thorson & Wells, 2016), through which they are exposed to different and dynamic intersecting public discourses (Bakardjieva, 2012). On the one hand, this means that a variety of political topics and discourses can impact users' perception of what is desirable and appropriate inter(action). On the other hand, as different social contexts come together in the users' newsfeeds, individuals must navigate the appropriateness of different (inter)actions before multiple audiences (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014; Marwick & Boyd, 2011, 2014). As a result, citizenship on social media platforms "is firmly rooted in private experiences, needs, and concerns, but it sheds this shell through collective identification and movement from private to interpersonal, group and public discourse" (Bakardjieva, 2012, p. 1358).

In sum, by offering spaces where social and political matters continuously intersect at the nexus of private and public spheres afforded by specific social media platforms (Papacharissi, 2010), social media environments as spaces for communication have crucially changed the social conditions of political socialization (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015; Jansson et al., 2021). Thus, my dissertation aims to deepen the initial insight into the concern for the quality of the public discourse (Gagrčin et al., 2022) by inquiring about each of the key practices—information gathering and sharing, political self-expression, and discourse care—separately, in order to understand **how platformized social experiences shape a) citizenship norms and b) perceptions of „good citizenship. "**

When political participation is embedded in practices of everyday sociability, then it is the social context and interpersonal relations with other citizens that matter for people's expectations towards political behavior – in addition to individuals' understanding of democracy and attitudes towards institutions more generally. Thus, the theoretical aim of this

dissertation is to devise a *social* account of citizenship norms on social media platforms. One way to theoretically reapproach citizenship norms is to study them in a way that considers the connection and mutual interdependence of social and political behavior on social media platforms. First, this means looking at how people's experiences and interactions with others on these platforms can impact their perceptions of appropriate behavior. Second, it entails extending the focus from individual-level processes and experiences to include interpersonal dimensions of political behavior.

It follows that on the methodological level, we need an approach that enables us to examine how these changed conditions of political behavior matter for citizens' perceptions of their role. My main methodological proposition is to think about social media platforms "as if social really mattered" (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015) and depart from analyzing citizenship norms as people's attitudes towards participation or ideals of good citizenship as has traditionally been the case. Instead, I propose to examine citizenship norms as social norms—expectations whose defiance entails social disapproval. Since social norms help to create a sense of order and predictability in interpersonal interactions and serve as a basis for evaluating the actions of others (Bicchieri, 2006), examining citizenship norms this way enables us to understand what people expect of situated political behavior and how that matters for their behavior.

Accordingly, the empirical part of this dissertation project explores how contextual circumstances of social (inter)action may shape citizens' expectations of self and others regarding political behavior on social media platforms. On the one hand, I am interested in how individual perceptions of their information environments and social media affordances shape their expectations related to others' political behavior on social media platforms. For this, I examine three intersecting contexts: a) individuals' information environment as a source of relevant political discourses that inform the need and content of participation (traditional pillar of political socialization), b) platform environments, i.e., users' perceptions of social media affordances, and c) social environment, i.e., the relevance of social ties and identification with social groups for interpreting discourses, situations and the need for (inter)action (Jansson et al., 2021).

My dissertation is structured as follows: In the section **Theoretical Framework**, I first recap the developments in citizenship norms in the context of new media, contouring some of the main fault lines upon which I build my theoretical argument. Then, I outline how social ontological approaches can help us examine citizenship norms by embedding them in

contexts of everyday social interaction on social media platforms. Finally, I discuss how citizenship norms have traditionally been studied in empirical research and why we should study them as social expectations instead of attitudes to good citizenship. The empirical core of my thesis consists of three empirical studies, each looking at key political practices in social media environments identified in Gagrčin et al. (2022): information gathering and sharing, political self-expression, and discourse care (i.e., intervention against incivility). **Study 1** illustrates that informed citizenship ideals are shared across the two countries with different information environments, however, in the case of weak media and institutional trust individuals expect *mutual* aid in navigating platformized news use comparably more. **Study 2** examines the role of citizens' social identities (identification with *social groups* in their information environment). It establishes the relevance of national ideological discourses for ideas about "good political expression," and that political self-expression is a personal norm related to political self-actualization, rather than a citizenship norm. **Study 3** establishes that as contexts collapse in users' newsfeeds, social (such as personal relatedness to uncivil users) and spatial heuristics (e.g., their personal profile) inform and delimit their sense of responsibility to enforce civility norms. Together, these studies deepen my previous co-authored work (Gagrčin et al., 2022). I discuss the implications in the dissertation's concluding section **General Discussion** and outline future directions and possibilities for studying citizenship norms in digital environments.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

### Citizenship Norms and New Media: From Duty to Self-actualization, and Back Again?

In research on political participation, "citizenship" is commonly understood as "a relationship between an individual and a state [… which] has behavioral, attitudinal, and normative aspects" (van Deth, 2007). According to Sigel (1965), a society maintains itself by socializing new citizens with its traditions and conventions about how citizenship is enacted. Because political rights do not ensure the enactment of those rights, scholars underscore the relevance of obligations to act (Janoski, 1998; Lister, 2003). This is where citizenship norms come on stage. Historically, the concept stems from the seminal work of Almond and Verba (1963) on political culture, which they define as "the particular distribution of patterns of orientation toward political objects among the members of a nation" (p. 13). In this context, media and political elites are a relevant source of ideas about "good citizenship" (Pykett et al., 2010), defined as "normative statements about desirable orientations and behaviors of individuals in a democratic polity" (van Deth, 2009, p. 176). Accordingly, citizenship norms are understood as orientations toward the self and others in their role as citizens (Dalton, 2008). At the same time, citizenship norms convey citizens' ideas about what makes a good citizen (in the specific national state and historical period) (e.g., Conover et al., 1991; Schudson, 1999). On the other hand, citizenship norms manifest in people's expectations of self and others in terms of desirable political behavior (Dalton, 2008; van Deth, 2007). As expectations towards political behavior such as voting and obeying laws, citizenship norms are necessary for upholding social order and democracy as a form of government (van Deth, 2007).

The common thread in this field of research is the discourse on the basic categories through which our understanding of democracy is shaped—their shared ontology (Frega, 2019b). Concretely, we tend to study how forms of participation (such as voting and protesting) connect central actors of democracies: individuals and institutions. In this sense, "democracy as institutions" appears as the only relevant context in which citizenship norms emerge, manifesting in feelings of obligation and duty towards the state.

However, since the late 1980s, citizenship (and many other areas of society) has been massively shaped by the individualist ideology and postmaterialist shift in which personal *choices*, as opposed to obligations, became central (Giddens, 1991; Inglehart, 1997). According to Inglehart (1997), the decline of traditional class structures in advanced

industrial societies has led to a shift in values and priorities among individuals and society as a whole. This shift towards postmaterialist values is characterized by an increased emphasis on self-expression, quality of life, and individual rights, and a decrease in the importance of traditional material values such as economic growth and national security. As people abandoned traditional roles, they were encouraged to work on "the reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991; Manning, 2013).

Individualization of political participation accelerated in the first decades of the 21st century following the emergence of new media, and specifically, social media platforms. These were said to provide new ways of thinking about participation, inducing a transition from thinking in universals to more diverse, particularistic ways grounded in the wish for self-actualization and building communities with like-minded others (Bennett, 2008; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Along these lines, new forms of citizenship "allow[ed] great variety, eclecticism and personal patterning" while displaying "little fear of abandoning traditional principles" (Plummer, 2003, p. 95). Many of these participation forms focus on public discourse and communicative action (information sharing, self-expression, interaction) rather than concrete institutional politics where citizens' role is reduced to occasional voting and writing letters to MPs.

The diversification of participation forms posed a problem for the relationship between the individual and the state traditionally rooted in duty and obligation. It is in this context that the concept of citizenship norms has made come back in the late 2000s in Dalton's (2008) seminal study on generational differences in attitudes towards different forms of participation, and prompted a decade-long debate about a shift from participation forms rooted in a sense of duty and obligation toward optionality rooted personal choices, preferences and striving for self-actualization (Bennett, 2008; Putnam, 2017; Thorson, 2015). The subsequent research tested the dichotomy of norms focused on explaining online and offline political participation (Copeland, 2014; Feezell et al., 2016; Kunst et al., 2021b; Lane, 2020) and media use (Copeland & Feezell, 2017; Leißner et al., 2019). As a result, scholarship relativized the early assertation that younger generations have become detached from institutional politics and that instead norms were becoming pluralized (Penney, 2019; Thorson, 2015; Vromen et al., 2016).

By the time I started working on this dissertation in late 2019, the discourse about political participation and social media platforms in particular had shifted towards a more negative tone with a focus on the rising incivility, junk content, "fake news" and polarization

as dangers to democracy (e.g., Carlson, 2020; Chadwick, 2019; M. L. Miller & Vaccari, 2020). In this story, citizens appeared both as perpetrators and as victims. When Penney (2019) and Ziegele et al. (2020) showed that people's sense of duty to partake in social media discussions was crucially prompted by (mis)behavior of other users, I came to believe it was important to understand what informs people's behavior *on* these platforms in addition to whether they participate at all.

To understand how citizens conceive of their role on social media platforms, we had to go beyond studying social media as mere *tools* for participation and consider them *as communication environments.* By changing the question from "what do people do with social media," we ought to ask "what do people do *on* social media?" This way, we could treat social media as *sociotechnical contexts* that enable and constrain certain forms of communication (Flanagin, 2020; Nagy & Neff, 2015). However, since it was not clear how the different experiences and ideas of duty emerged, we had to pivot from explaining participation *by a priori-defined norms* to offering explanations *of norms relevant to behavior on social media*.

Following this logic, and using an inductive approach, my co-authors and I have found that users' negative experiences with information abundance, including mis- and disinformation and various types of junk content, and incivility prompt concern for *quality*, not the quantity of key political practices on social media—informing oneself, sharing information with others, political self-expression, and political discussion (Gagrčin et al., 2022). Instead of self-involved individuals that strive for self-actualization, what stuck out was people's concern for the quality of the public discourse and their role in shaping these environments with their actions. Concerning information use, people expected individual information care, meaning that people should pay attention to how they inform themselves (i.e., from which sources, ensure a diverse news diet, etc.). Further, people held discourse care, i.e., caring for the quality of the public discourse, to be an important part of citizenship online. On the one hand, this implied contributing to the public discourse considerately; on the other hand, it meant correcting false information and counterspeaking against incivility. In that sense, citizenship norms on social media platforms referred to "how citizens ought to behave in the public discourse shaped by social media" (Gagrčin et al. 2022, p. 8).

Thus, we had made a full circle from participation rooted in duty towards the state, to allegations of egocentric self-actualizing citizenship detached from duty, back to speaking about a sense of obligation to act in a certain way. Yet this time, citizenship norms were not

situated at the nexus between individual and state. Instead, it seemed that the ideas of how to act *properly* on social media were of horizontal nature—something that citizens had to negotiate amongst themselves. In other words, social media as communication environments did not seem to change individual's relationship with the state as much as it altered the nature of citizens' public connection by increasing people's awareness of what was happening in their public environment as well as their sense of situatedness and agency in it (Couldry et al., 2007; Vromen et al., 2016) – with implications for how we study citizenship norms in these environments.

In the following, formulate two implications for the study of citizenship norms stemming the shift from citizenship as the relationship between individuals and the state to individual relationship to the public discourse on social media platforms, and social relations as they take place within this discourse. The first one is theoretical and includes broadening our perspective on actors and contexts which create conditions for norm emergence. The second one is rather empirical and relates to how we conceptualize citizenship norms as expectations towards self and others.

## Studying Citizenship Norms as if the Social Mattered

So far, "democracy as institutions" appeared as the only relevant context in which citizenship norms emerge, manifesting in feelings of obligation and duty towards the state. However, this approach has limits when it comes to understanding how citizens conceive of their role on social media platforms as they shape spaces and conditions of the "political" (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015; Flanagin, 2020). In essence, political ontology focused on the relationship between individuals and institutions reinforces meanings salient to scholars while being insensitive to people's everyday experiences which have a communicative, interactional, and discursive character (Hay, 2006). To understand what it means to be and act as a citizen on social media platforms we need to consider how our behavior relates to other citizens and what kind of implications it has for the shared experience on social media platforms, instead of how it relates to institutions and the state. Thus, we ought to study political behavior on social media platforms "as if the social really mattered" (Couldry & van Dijck, 2015).

### *Social Ontological Approach to Citizenship Norms*

To account for the social conditions of political behavior on social media platforms, I work on a social ontological premise that between people's political beliefs and actions, and the expectations of political behavior that institutions set for us, there's a complicated middle ground of expectations that arises from how we interact with each other in specific contexts (Dahlgren, 2006; Frega, 2019b). I treat communication in social media platforms as a sort of this middle ground. Crucially, the social ontological approach compromises neither the individual autonomy nor the relevance of institutional order in directing social life and political activity. Rather, it helps us understand how norms are negotiated, defined, and enacted between institutional context and individual cognitions—namely on the level of social practices and interpersonal relations (Dahlgren, 2002, 2009; Frega, 2019b).

According to this approach, first, norms may emerge from the interactions between people and their contexts, rather than just being a reflection of what people want or the contexts and structures they are in (Frega, 2019b; Hay, 2006). Second, citizenship as a social practice emphasizes routines and habitual behaviors, which are interconnected and involve physical and mental activities, the use of objects, and a set of background knowledge, skills, emotions, and motivations (Reckwitz, 2002, p. 249). Looking at citizenship as a social practice invites inquiry into how citizenship norms emerge from habitualized social media use—both in the sense of its embeddedness in everyday routines (e.g., scrolling through social media while eating breakfast), as well as habitual behaviors on these platforms (e.g., types of interaction such as "liking" whatever your friends post or commenting on news articles). Habits are central to social practices because they us navigate everyday life without too much thinking, thus subtly influencing how we behave and what we considered expectable and appropriate in certain situations (Frega, 2019b).

If citizenship norms are shaped by patterns of social (inter)action and experiences, social ontology not only allows but also requires us to explore the relational aspect of citizenship on social media platforms (Couldry et al., 2014; Dahlgren, 2006), including the role of social media platforms as communication infrastructures therein.

### *Relational Aspect of Citizenship on Social Media Platforms*

The relational aspect of citizenship refers to a constellation of being with others, in the sense of acting with and reacting upon others (Isin, 2008). First, the relational aspect of citizenship may refer to the nature of citizenship as an interpersonal relationship. On the one hand, social media platforms enable, challenge, and change how people form and maintain

relationships and connections by providing new ways to connect with others and display this connection (Donath & Boyd, 2004; Quinn & Papacharissi, 2018). On the other hand, social media platforms enable us to communicate with large groups of people, meaning that many encounters on social media platforms are with strangers, for example, in the comment section below news articles. These encounters on social media platforms can influence people's attitudes and actions, including political self-expression, information use, and voting behavior – even if users simply observe how others interact (Bond et al., 2012; Gervais, 2015).

From an individual perspective, the relational dimension of citizenship refers to modes and individual experiences of being connected to the public world and learning "things or issues which are regarded as being of shared concern rather than of purely private concern" (Couldry et al., 2007, p. 107). Individuals' public connection too ought to be understood as a social practice in the sense outlined above (Couldry et al., 2007; Reckwitz, 2002). In this regard, social media platforms have altered how individuals relate to the public in multiple ways. First, and in line with postmaterialist and individualist "reflexive project of the self" (Giddens, 1991; Manning, 2013), social media platforms enable users to act in the public discourse afforded by these platforms, underscoring the relevance of voice and political self-expression for citizenship (Bennett, 2008; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). Exerting voice can play a self-actualizing role in that individuals strive for self-empowerment by asserting their identities, but also as a means to seek influence through connective action with others (Allen & Light, 2015; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). In that sense, individuals can co-shape the discourse in social media environments. However, second, as political activities became increasingly intertwined with other routinized social practices, they also become increasingly mundane (Bakardjieva, 2012). Since people use social media in their everyday life for a wide range of purposes, especially for sociability and entertainment (Alhabash & Ma, 2017), users' political behavior on social media platforms is better understood as "dispersed practice" that happens "on the go" than sustained engagement (Couldry, 2004; Couldry et al., 2007; Dahlgren, 2009).

### *Affordances as Relational Properties of Social Media Platforms*[1]

The social ontological approach posits social interactions always occur within the framework of patterned social expectations (Frega, 2019b). However, social media do not

[1] Bucher & Helmond, 2018, p. 235

correspond to “a social reality ‘out there’. Rather, social media establish a kind of social reality by providing the means through which real persons qua users perform activities of very particular kinds that have largely been incited by social media platforms themselves” (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2018, p. 156). In other words, social interaction is enabled and constrained by users’ perceptions of social media platforms’ interface and affordances (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Nagy & Neff, 2015). According to Gibson (2014), the way we perceive and interact with our environment is not through a direct perception of the environment itself, but rather through the potential actions and opportunities it offers, which he calls affordances. In other words, our perception of an environment is shaped by the ways in which it allows us to act within it. Thus, the way that social media platforms are designed and perceived by users may shape patterns of social expectations, thus setting a framework for what kind of interaction is technically possible and what we expect from each other within the technical constraints (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Nagy & Neff, 2015). Studying relational aspects of citizenship norms, first, requires taking seriously “the experience of *being connected [with other people]* through social media and its material conditions“ italics(Couldry & Kallinikos, 2018, p. 149, itallics added). Second, it requires examining how individuals *experience and encounter content* on social media platforms, i.e., how aspects of social media platforms, such as algorithmic curation, shape people’s public connection.

**Visibility and Socially Mediated Publicness**

Scholars have long argued that the visibility of content and associations, as one of the core affordances of social media platforms, is consequential for individuals’ self-presentation and their interaction with others (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Rettberg, 2018). Central concepts in this regard are those of socially mediated publicness and context collapse. Socially mediated publicness refers to how publicness (the state of being visible to the public) on social media is shaped by social factors and processes, such as social networks, relationships, and interactions (Baym & boyd, 2012). However, users have limited control therein, since visibility afforded by social media platforms, along with algorithmic content curation, tends to produce context collapse (Marwick & boyd, 2011; Davis & Jurgenson, 2014).

Context collapse can occur when different social contexts or audiences are brought together in a single online space, such as users‘ newsfeeds—which is directly associated with how people‘s online profiles and interactions may be visible to a wide variety of audiences, including friends, family, colleagues, and strangers. As different social contexts collapse in

the users' newsfeeds, individuals must navigate the appropriateness of different (inter)actions before multiple audiences (Baym & Boyd, 2012; Marwick & Boyd, 2011). In consequence, some people may strive to publish certain content as a form of identity-work (e.g., Jackson et al., 2020; Leißner, 2021), while others may self-censor (Sveningsson, 2015; Vraga et al., 2015), express themselves in a way to maintain the lowest common denominator of what is appropriate among their different imagined audiences (Hogan, 2010) or operate multiple profiles within the same social media platform for different types of social ties (Kang & Wei, 2020).

Against the background of intersecting contexts, people may perceive not only an urge to comply with generalized social expectations (e.g., be polite), but also specific interpersonal expectations stemming from existing personal relationships with other people (e.g., using a gender-sensitive language or advocating for certain political stances).

### Ephemerality of Content and Context

Most social media platforms as ephemeral media are designed to make (at least some forms of) communication accessible for a short time, after which the content disappears or becomes inaccessible (Bayer et al., 2016). In turn, the nature of public discourse people encounter on social media platforms is "overall, an ephemeral, real-time attuned, and perpetually changing 'everyday' that reorders the trivial pursuits and habits of individuals into groups, categories or profiles" (Couldry & Kallinikos, 2018, p. 156).

When it comes to content reception, users experience communication in social media platforms environments in form of algorithmically enabled information flows (Thorson & Wells, 2016), through which they are exposed to different and dynamic intersecting public discourses (Bakardjieva, 2012). Social media platforms have become among the central spaces where people consume news (Newman et al., 2022). Concerning key democratic practices such as informing oneself, algorithmic curation can contribute to incidental exposure to political content that one would otherwise miss (Nanz & Matthes, 2022; Weeks & Lane, 2020); however, as a result, many users tend to develop the idea that actively searching for news is not necessary anymore, because "news-will-find-them" (Gil de Zúñiga et al., 2017; Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019). In turn, based on their curation habits (Merten, 2021) and social networks (Ahmed & Gil-Lopez, 2022), users come to experience quite different information flows (Thorson & Wells, 2016; Wells & Thorson, 2017). This also means that people may be situated at the intersection of very different political discourses and

narratives, including a variety of topics from different socio-political contexts (e.g., national and international news media). The traits of national political and media environments are important to account for here, since in some contexts, for example, those characterized by low media trust, people may question the value of informing oneself altogether regardless of the social media (Pasitselska, 2022; Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Relatedly, with an increasing amount of junk content on social media platforms, people can develop new expectations about what it means to be a "good informed citizen" and expectations they have in relation to others when it comes to "proper" information gathering and sharing (Gagrčin et al., 2022; Swart & Broersma, 2022).

Concerning political self-expression, ephemerality can animate users to share more spontaneous and outspoken content, since they do not have to worry about the persistence of online content in the early phase of the social media (boyd, 2010; Lane et al., 2019); at the same time, this may lower the cost of sharing questionable content (Islam et al., 2020). Further, ephemerality can also create a sense of urgency or exclusivity so that users may feel the urge to view and engage with content before it disappears. Both can contribute to norms of appropriate self-expression, such as authenticity (Marwick & Boyd, 2011) but also expectations to resist affective engagement, and instead curate what they post thoughtfully and check the veracity of content before posting (Gagrčin et al., 2022). Thus, users' public connection afforded by social media platforms, and containing practices of reception, interaction, and self-expression, is intertwined with affordances that enable and constrain them.

This section aimed to offer arguments for the need to examine citizenship norms in the flux of sociotechnical dynamics. In short, when I write that social media platforms have changed the social conditions of political participation, I mean that (inter)acting and observing how others (inter)act, and consuming content in the specific conditions afforded by social media platforms may shape people's ideas of good citizenship and citizenship norms. This is especially the case when citizens realize that their online experiences depend upon others' behavior since public discourse on social media platforms is co-shaped by all users (Gagrčin et al., 2022; Ziegele et al., 2020). Based on this, citizenship norms as expectations towards self and others concerning political behavior may stem from an increasing awareness of the tension between autonomy and interdependence of citizens' political behavior on social media platforms.

Accordingly, my empirical studies examine the extent to which citizenship norms in social media environments are contingent upon social and relational, political and infrastructural contexts in which political practices are embedded. **Study 1** examines the role of national information environments for citizens' ideals and practices of good informed citizenship on social media platforms. To carve out specificities of the context, I take a comparative approach and examine citizens' normative ideas in Germany and Serbia. **Study 2** examines the role of social identities and salient socio-political discourses for norms related to political self-expression on social media. **Study 3** examines platform-specific boundary conditions of responsibility to address incivility, and perceptions of desirability and appropriateness of user intervention.

## How to Find Citizenship Norms on Social Media Platforms

To ensure that the concept of citizenship norms can effectively tell us something about the social conditions of political behavior on social media platforms, we need to have a closer look at how citizenship norms have been studied empirically. This chapter examines the social and interpersonal nature of citizenship norms as a type of social norms.

### *Citizenship Norms as Attitudes towards Participation and "Good Citizenship"*

As previously mentioned, the concept of citizenship norms made a comeback in Dalton's 2008 study, where he defines them as "a shared set of expectations about the citizen's role in politics" (Dalton, 2008, p. 78). Most quantitative research that followed operationalizes Dalton's definition by asking about the extent to which political activities are considered "important for being a good citizen" (e.g., Bolzendahl & Coffé, 2013; Coffé & van der Lippe, 2010; Copeland & Feezell, 2017; Hooghe et al., 2016). Defined this way, citizenship norms are attitudes—individual's enduring evaluation of participation forms (American Psychological Association, n.d.). Similarly, Ohme and de Vreese define norms as "perception of 'behavioral regularities,' for example considering casting a vote as a civic duty or seeing volunteering as an important value in society" (2020, p. 2). In light of my dissertation's aim to offer a social account of citizenship norms, the existing approach is limited in two ways.

First, most of the cited empirical research aims to explain political participation *by* norms rather than offering explanations *of* norms. Second, by assessing attitudes towards participation, as in individuals' enduring evaluations, feelings, and tendencies abstract "good

citizenship," we do not know how do they matter for citizens' understanding of their own role and behavior. Relatedly, participation understood as a spectrum between participation and non-participation still does not tell us anything about the *quality* of participation. This may have been unproblematic in relation to pre-digital participation like voting (though Doherty et al., 2019 beg to differ), but not practical in relation to online participation, where the character of participation is more pertinent than whether one participates or not (Gagrčin et al., 2022).

Third, and relatedly, attitudes towards good citizenship ideals, which are often centered around a higher good such as democracy or a public sphere (Hove, 2021), do not always lead directly to political action. Citing Durkheim, Lindenberg (2008) has argued that as society becomes more diverse and individualized, norms tend to become more abstract to apply to a wider range of people and circumstances. As a result, these norms "rule only the most general forms of conduct and rule them in a very general manner, saying what must be done, not how it must be done" (Durkheim, 1964, p. 289 in Lindenberg, 2008). In this vein, Kjerstin Thorson (2015) showed that "good citizenship" is a zombie category for many young people, who are unable to connect this idea with anything actionable. Thus, people do not participate to be good citizens, which means that normative insight alone is not enough to be actionable. In situations where abstract norms are difficult to apply, either people don't have the cognitive resources or know-how to do so, other mechanisms may take over (Lindenberg, 2008, p. 77).

In sum, the common way of looking at citizenship norms in empirical research omits one of the central points of Dalton's original definition, namely that citizenship norms convey *expectations* towards self and others. Taking citizenship norms as social expectations seriously is crucial for examining social conditions of political behavior on social media due to their relational component contained in expectations we have towards other people (and vice versa) (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020). Assessing citizenship norms as social expectations is a way to understand norms as lived practices, which makes them more useful than assessing them as attitudes towards participation or ideals of good citizenship. Thus, in the following, I examine the social norms literature to outline my approach to finding and analyzing citizenship norms on social media platforms.

### *Citizenship Norms as Social Expectations*

Social norms literature spans multiple disciplines, including sociology, psychology, political science and philosophy. In their comprehensive review of social norms across multiple disciplines, Legros and Cislaghi (2020) find common threads of what social norms are not, namely personal tastes (i.e., personal preferences), personal habits, and behavioral regularities. However, there is a lot of debate as to how social norms are defined and measured, and social sciences have multiple ways of approaching social norms. Psychological research is typically interested in how social norms influence individual behavior and cognitions. Here, social norms are treated as individual (and thus, internal) constructs (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020). Here, social norms are defined as beliefs of individuals about what is common (descriptive norms) and what is approved of in specific situations (injunctive norms) (Cialdini et al., 1990). In contrast, sociological research is interested in how social norms emerge, how they are maintained and enforced, and how they change. Thus, sociological approaches tend to treat norms as collective (and thus, external) constructs and treat them on the level of groups, communities, or cultures (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020). Since my dissertation project is interested in how people respond to their environments, I situate my thinking about citizenship norms in the realm of social psychology, which aims to integrate the two levels. On the one hand, I am interested in how individuals' perceptions of their information environments and social media affordances shape their expectations related to others' political behavior on social media platforms. On the other hand, I want to understand how people internalize those expectations and how they inform individual behavior.

So how does one learn what is expected in terms of political behavior? One way in which people learn norms is through socialization. Specifically, and as previously argued, in the process of political socialization people learn and adopt the norms, values, attitudes, and behaviors of the political system they live in (Sigel, 1965; Almond & Verba, 1963). Though media is not the only factor in political socialization, it is still an important one (de Vreese & Möller, 2014; Ohme & de Vreese, 2020), so changes in the social and media environment can affect the political socialization (Bennett et al., 2010). Specifically, in social media environments, political socialization can occur through the process of social learning, whereby individuals observe what kind of behaviors are rewarded or sanctioned (Bandura, 1977).

Another way to learn norms is through the process of structural ritualization. According to Knottnerus (2016; 1997), structural ritualization assumes that ritualization is a

key aspect of social behavior, through which collective practices gain symbolic significance. In turn, symbolic meanings give direction and focus to social life and group interactions. On the individual level, people develop a pool of symbolic resources—their citizenship vocabularies—that inform the breadth and width of their political behavior (Thorson, 2012). For social media platforms, this means that the qualitative formation of political practices through repeated interactions (e.g., commenting on news articles, and discussing politics on forums) can lead to the emergence of a social practice with its own normative order (Frega, 2019b). In that sense, I do not mean to conflate habits with norms; rather, my argument is that while people use social media habitually, they may develop expectations related to "proper" ways of use and behavior.

Norms can influence behavior in two ways. First, they exercise pressure on individuals to act in a specific way (Bicchieri, 2006; Villatoro et al., 2010). Here, people consider the consequences of compliance and non-compliance with the norm, which can include reputational (e.g., being criticized or excluded by relevant others) or emotional damage (e.g., feeling ashamed) (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020). Thus, citizenship norms pressure people to behave in a certain way because they think others expect them to do so (Bicchieri, 2006; Cialdini et al., 1990; Rimal & Real, 2003). When people apply injunctive norms to themselves, they can function as an "inner critic" (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2017). In that sense, norms serve as both a guideline for behavior and a standard for evaluating that behavior. In retrospect then, self-actualizing citizenship, as discussed in the previous decade, served neither as a guideline for behavior nor as a measure for evaluating that behavior.

Second, people can embrace a norm to the extent that it becomes part of their internal motivation to behave in a certain way. This process is called norm internalization (Bicchieri et al., 2018). However, scholars disagree on whether internalized norms can be considered social norms. Some research postulates that social norms influence behavior *only* in the presence of anticipated sanctions or rewards (Bicchieri et al., 2018; Villatoro et al., 2010). This means that if someone complies with an expectation without anticipating sanctions, then this compliance does not stem from social but from *personal* norms (J. E. Anderson & Dunning, 2014). Thus, people comply with the norm because it is consistent with their beliefs or because compliance contributes to their self-understanding and self-actualization (Bicchieri et al., 2018; Lapinski & Rimal, 2005).

Based on this, in my dissertation project, for something to be considered a citizenship norm (and not a personal norm) people should expect others to engage in an activity and

disapprove of non-compliance. For short, I refer to *citizenship norms as expectations toward political behavior whose defiance entails social disapproval.*

Citizenship norms as shared expectations contain a justification to regard those who fail to act by the norm in a negative light and, perhaps, sanction them in some way (Brennan et al., 2013). Sanctions on social media platforms can include a range of actions, such as correction, expressing disapproval, or unfriending (e.g., Porten-Cheé et al., 2020; Tsfati & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2018). Due to the visibility of behavior on social media platforms, in theory, individuals are motivated to conform to norms and to apply some sort of social pressure to others who violate them. At the same time, the state of socially mediated publicness and context collapse may have consequences not only for individuals' political behavior but also for their considerations regarding enforcing norms (Moisuc & Brauer, 2019; Mor et al., 2015).

My empirical studies experiment with different ways of assessing citizenship norms as social expectations. **Study 1** looks at norms as embedded in broader normative vocabularies (Swidler, 1986; Thorson, 2012), which connect norms and ideals into more or less coherent citizenship vocabularies. **Study 2** looks at citizenship norms as injunctive norms and ideals of good citizenship as frames for interpreting the content of political self-expression. **Study 3** examines the tension between ideals and citizenship norms as injunctive norms.

Methodologically, I employed qualitative interviews as my main method. This allowed me to thoroughly inquire and understand the meaning citizens ascribed to different forms of participation on social media platforms, how people situate themselves in the public discourse afforded by these platforms, and how their public connection shapes their expectations towards other citizens' behavior. Because I considered the willingness to disapprove of non-compliance with norms as constitutive of citizenship norms, in the interviews, I explicitly asked about disapproval and critique of certain behaviors, as well as a justification thereof. In the analysis, I coded ideals as actions that participants *desired* to happen, *ideally* wanted to happen, or considered to be *theoretically* relevant, and injunctive norms in terms of must, should, and ought to do.

## STUDY 1. Between Individual and Collective Social Effort: Vocabularies of Informed Citizenship in Different Information Environments[2]

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### Abstract

Information disorder and digital media affordances challenge informed citizenship as an ideal and in practice. While scholars have attempted to adapt the normative ideal to contemporary changes and challenges by introducing new metaphors and normative benchmarks, this study investigates citizens' ideals and practices of informed citizenship by deploying the concept of citizenship vocabularies. Drawing on interviews with citizens from different information environments—Germany and Serbia—we offer a conceptual outline of informed citizenship as an individual and collective social effort. Our findings illustrate the role of the information environment in shaping citizenship vocabularies. We advance the idea of informed citizenship as a relational practice, arguing for a social ontological approach to theorizing informed citizenship today.

### Introduction

For over a century, the ideal of informed citizenship, which posits that citizens should keep abreast of current issues and political parties to participate in democracy and make informed decisions (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001; Schudson, 1999), has stood its ground as a normative basis for modern democracies (Schudson, 1999). To practice informed citizenship, individuals must have access to factual information that facilitates the evaluation of policy debates and be able to use these facts to inform their political preferences (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Currently, this ideal is challenged on multiple fronts. For one, digital media, where most citizens engage in political communication (Newman et al., 2020),

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not only afford diverse possibilities to produce, consume, and share political information but also to avoid it. At the same time, the ubiquity and fast diffusion of junk content (Bradshaw et al., 2020) contribute to the information disorder (Wardle, 2018), challenging individuals' information practices and political communication as a whole (M. L. Miller & Vaccari, 2020). Although scholars have attempted to adapt the normative ideal of informed citizenship to keep up with developments in the media landscape (e.g., Schudson, 1999; Zaller, 2003; Moe, 2020), ordinary citizens usually do not reach for democratic theory to inform their actions—instead, they draw from personal experiences in their immediate information environments (Dahlgren, 2006; Stoycheff, 2020). Our study sought to understand how ordinary citizens in the contemporary information environment make sense of informed citizenship as ideal and in practice.

On a theoretical level, our study is informed by the idea that socialization in a specific civic culture—including experiences with their respective information environments—shapes people's understandings of their role as citizens (Almond & Verba, 1963; Pasitselska, 2022). These understandings manifest in shared vocabularies of citizenship (Thorson, 2012), dictating what is necessary, desirable, legitimate, and feasible in a particular context. Because information environments differ structurally (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) and vary in their degree of resilience to disinformation (Humprecht et al., 2020), people's perceptions of, experiences with, and responses to information disorder may differ as well. We adopted a comparative approach to account for the contextual factors of informed citizenship and based our study on semi-structured interviews with social media users from Germany and Serbia.

The results reveal that citizens in the two countries experience information disorder and digital media's role in it differently, which manifests in distinct yet overlapping vocabularies of informed citizenship. In addition to the typical focus on *individual efforts* to become an informed member of the electorate and participant in public life, this study underscores the social dimension of informed citizenship, where the emphasis is on a *collective social effort* as a shared responsibility to enable informed citizenship on a societal level by preventing and counteracting facets of the information disorder. The study outlines the relevance of expanding our inquiry to informed citizenship as a relational practice and horizontal civic norm, arguing for a social ontological view in theorizing about informed citizenship.

## Informed Citizenship as an Ideal and Practice

In a nutshell, the informed citizenship framework demands that citizens continuously update their knowledge about political issues by following news media in order to exercise their role as citizens (Poindexter & McCombs, 2001; Schudson, 1999), such as to legitimize institutions by voting and hold them accountable when necessary (e.g., Zaller, 2003). This view on citizenship is strongly framed by political science's vertical approach toward citizenship, which focuses on individual citizens' relationship with the state (Schnaudt et al., 2021) and understands informed citizenship in terms of a civic duty toward the polity (Dalton, 2008). However, this approach has been criticized for its ontological view of citizens as atomized rational individuals "devoid of civic bonds, out of some sociocultural black box, ready to play his or her role in democracy" and citizenship as "an activity where 'no experience is necessary'" (Dahlgren, 2006, p. 269; Frega, 2019b; Moe, 2020). Furthermore, despite recognizing the differences in individual capacities to practice informed citizenship (e.g., Moe, 2020; Schudson, 1999), studies that employed the vertical approach tend to resort to a tone of shaking a "finger at ordinary people for not shouldering their civic obligations sufficiently" (Dahlgren, 2006, p. 270).

In contrast, the cultural approach to citizenship offers a way to avoid imposed normativity: it stresses the importance of *social* ontology. Social ontology underscores looking beyond institutional processes and dynamics and aiming for a "realistic" inquiry into citizenship as a process that unfolds in the interactions with other members of society (Dahlgren, 2006; Moe, 2020; Frega, 2019a, 2019b). The rapid increase in the complexity of the media landscape—particularly, the proliferation of new communication technologies—warrants engaging with the cultural approach. First, the digital affordances of online environments have resulted in the diversification of information practices, enabling citizens to consume both professional journalistic and user-generated content (Bennett et al., 2009; Feezell et al., 2016). Second, research has demonstrated that informed citizenship goes beyond civic duty: it also entails self-actualizing elements, such as creating, editing, distributing, and discussing content (Feezell et al., 2016; Kim, Jones-Jang, & Kenski, 2021). Third, much of contemporary political communication takes place in social media environments (Newman et al., 2020), where communication depends on users' interactions (Moe, 2020; Swart & Broersma, 2022), their ability and willingness to actively shape information flows (e.g., Swart, 2021), and on the prevailing social norms (Ekström, 2016; Lindell, 2020; Palmer & Toff, 2020; Thorson et al., 2014). Finally, depending on the sociality

options a medium offers, informed citizenship can be both an individual and a social practice (D. H. Kim et al., 2021; Wagner et al., 2021). Online platforms such as Facebook and messengers such as WhatsApp intermediate between the private and public spheres, offering citizens increased opportunities to engage in socially engaged informed citizenship and construct common knowledge (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022; Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020).

Apparently, there exists a mismatch between the normative ideas underlying informed citizenship as a vertical practice and the actual practices of informed citizenship that underscore its *horizontal* character. To learn how people might understand their role as informed citizens in today's age of increasing media complexity and (mis)information flows, we can turn to the cultural approach, which can expand our understanding of informed citizenship by offering a horizontal perspective on it.

**Information Disorder as a Feature of Information Environments**

The means to support informed citizenship practices are found in individuals' information environments. On the macro level, information environments entail a supply side—the quantity and quality of political information offered by the media system—and the demand side, which reflects the civic use of political information (van Aelst et al., 2017), that is, the practices of informed citizenship. Next to the information opportunity structures offered by their immediate mass media system, a good share of citizens uses social media to gain political information (Newman et al., 2020). There, citizens engage in many forms of content curation by following news media, politicians, trusted opinion leaders, and other communicators or do so passively, by liking or sharing content (Thorson et al., 2018).

In recent years, information environments worldwide have witnessed an upsurge in politically and economically motivated disruptive communication (Bennett & Livingston, 2018). Disruptive communication endangers the quantity and quality of political information most prominently by relativizing factual information (van Aelst et al., 2017). Typically, communication scholarship has differentiated between disinformation—information that is false and distributed deliberately—, and misinformation—information that is false and distributed because people believe it is true (Wardle, 2018). However, we find the concept of junk news to be more inclusive of various content that can contribute to the manipulation of public opinion. Junk news refers to content that is "an amalgam of a manipulative style, counterfeit activity, bias, a lack of professionalism, and enough credibility to deceive, and it

freerides on social media algorithms to generate attention" (Bradshaw et al., 2020, p. 189). The ubiquity of junk content and its distribution by various actors have become a feature of information environments worldwide, generating information disorder (Wardle, 2018).

Although citizens all over the world face junk news to some extent (Newman et al., 2020), the quality of political information differs significantly across political and social contexts (M. L. Miller & Vaccari, 2020) and is related to particular features of information environments (Humprecht et al., 2020; Newman et al., 2020). Applying the media systems framework by Hallin and Mancini (2004), Humprecht et al. (2020) found that two media system indicators are particularly predictive of exposure to junk news: social media use and low trust in mass media. However, although social media environments afford easy dissemination of all kinds of content, including junk news (Humprecht et al., 2020), social media use alone does not lead to junk news use. For example, countries such as Germany or the UK, which belong to the European mainstream model, demonstrate more resilience to junk news than countries such as Greece or Spain, which have been categorized as part of the South and East European model, notwithstanding a high level of social media use in both media systems (Humprecht et al., 2020; Peruško, 2016; Peruško et al., 2013). This suggests that while junk news is out there, different information environments may shape people's perceptions of the information disorder and their resources to address it. To address the context in which informed citizenship takes place, we asked the following research question:

RQ1: How do people experience information disorder in different information environments?

**Informed Citizenship and Cultures of News Consumption**

People's conceptions of their role as citizens—their civic ideals and practices—are scripted by their dialectical and historically grounded relationship with the media and political institutions (Swidler, 2005) and differ across civic cultures (Almond & Verba, 1963; Conover et al., 1991; Dalton & Welzel, 2014). These scripts are part of broader *vocabularies* that function as resources for action at the individual level (Swidler, 1986, 2005). Specifically, *citizenship vocabularies* can be understood as the cultural resources people draw on to think about their role as citizens (Thorson, 2012). For instance, a trusting relationship with the media is an ongoing process grounded in the appreciation of independent journalism and democratic institutions that recognize and support journalism's independence. In contrast, a mistrusting relationship with media may shape the way citizens inform themselves

(e.g., Humprecht, 2019; Pasitselska, 2022) or what they think about the value of being informed (e.g., Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020). Different information environments thus result in different civic cultures of news consumption (Pasitselska, 2022). These cultures, in turn, are reflected in the vocabularies of informed citizenship through the meanings that people attach to norms and ideals and how they translate these meanings into information practices.

A disorderly information environment may not only erode the common perception of reality necessary for democracy (M. L. Miller & Vaccari, 2020) but also alter the norms of informed citizenship themselves (Chadwick et al., 2018). Consequently, citizens develop new heuristics and norms to deal with the perceived information disorder, such as generalized skepticism (Fletcher & Nielsen, 2019), norms and practices of information care (Gagrčin et al., 2022; Swart & Broersma, 2022), and information correction (Penney, 2019; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022). Since the vocabularies of informed citizenship are contingent upon information environments, distinct information disorders as features of information environments may shape such vocabularies. For example, scholars have argued that low trust in mass media compels people to look for alternative sources (Humprecht, 2019) or to rely on close social ties for information verification (Pasitselska, 2022). Although we have seen quantitative comparative work on information disorder (Humprecht et al., 2020; Humprecht, 2019; Nielsen & Graves, 2017), more qualitative insights from a comparative perspective are necessary. To uncover the relationship between citizens' experiences in their respective information environments and the meaning they give to informed citizenship as a cultural practice, we asked the following question:

RQ2: What vocabularies of informed citizenship do people employ to navigate their information environments?

## Method

### *Country Selection*

We have argued that contextual experiences shape citizenship vocabularies and citizens' perceptions of information disorder. In line with this, we compared two countries with media systems whose structural features suggest a different level of permeability to junk news and possibly different cultures of news consumption: Germany and Serbia. Germany, belonging to the European mainstream model, is an established democracy with a robust

public broadcasting service, high social media use, and widespread public trust in the media (Newman et al., 2020). Part of the South and Eastern European model, Serbia is a relatively young democracy with moderate social media use, a government-dependent media system, presumably low media quality, and low trust in the media (Peruško et al., 2020). We assumed that Serbia would provide a more fertile ground for junk news because of the questionable quality of its mass media (Peruško, 2016; Peruško et al., 2013). Accordingly, we assumed that the vocabularies of informed citizenship would differ to some extent between the two contexts.

***Data Collection***

Because this study primarily aimed to illustrate people's situated understanding of informed citizenship and how they translate it into practice, we opted for an inductive approach. We employed semi-structured interviews, a method that allows vocabularies to emerge from people's narratives, drawing from a convenience sample of 40 interviews with German and Serbian citizens aged between 18 and 35.

Table S1-1. Study Participants

| Serbian participants | | | German participants | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| *Name* | *Age* | *Occupation* | *Name* | *Age* | *Occupation* |
| Natalija | 19 | student | Noah | 18 | taking a gap year |
| Tatjana | 22 | student | Laura | 21 | student |
| Maja | 22 | volunteer | Natascha | 25 | student |
| Petar | 22 | plaster worker | Sarah | 26 | consultant |
| Luka | 23 | graphic designer | Lisa | 26 | cleaning assistant |
| Stanko | 23 | fitness trainer | Stefan | 28 | student |
| Una | 25 | painter | Marlene | 29 | student |
| Lea | 26 | translator | Jennifer | 29 | teacher |
| Valerija | 26 | actress | Mia | 29 | works in HR |
| Živko | 27 | lawyer | Moritz | 29 | engineer |
| Ivan | 27 | software engineer | Magnus | 29 | programmer |
| Ema | 27 | student | Georg | 30 | graphic designer |
| Valentina | 27 | dancer | Sebastian | 31 | engineer |
| Klara | 27 | public servant | Helene | 31 | kindergarten teacher |
| Marko | 27 | baker | Markus | 31 | carpenter |

| | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Milan | 27 | manager | Farid | 31 | social worker |
| Nevena | 27 | unemployed | Franziska | 32 | public servant |
| Milutin | 29 | lawyer | Patrick | 33 | pharmacist |
| Nemanja | 29 | chef | Melanie | 34 | works in marketing |
| Jovica | 33 | web designer | Sabrina | 34 | social worker |

The data were collected in 2018 and 2020 within a larger project about online political participation and citizenship norms. In this study, we focused on the parts of the conversations that centered on the participants' information habits and experiences with junk news. The participants were sampled via local social media groups (e.g., university and neighborhood groups, typically non-political, serving the purpose of informing each other about events, selling or giving away furniture, etc.), through acquaintances, and via snowballing. Initially, the criteria for participation included daily use of at least one social media platform and being between 18 and 35 years of age. At the beginning of the sampling process, we did not specifically ask about the participants' political interest before the interview; however, along the way, we included this question in the pre-screening process to balance the level of political interest in the sample. The German sample's average age was 29, which was slightly older than the Serbian sample, where the average age was 26. In both samples, we ensured gender balance. The German sample was more academic, with two-thirds of the participants either having or currently pursuing a university degree. In the Serbian sample, the educational background was more balanced, with 11 out of 20 participants having an academic background. All interviews, lasting between 70 and 100 minutes, were conducted in German and Serbian using roughly the same interview guide (some of the aspects were tailored to each national context).

***Data Analysis***

We ascertained the vocabularies by looking for "common ground" in the data, such as shared examples, causal inferences, emotions, and the relationships between the examples. We conducted the analysis according to the methodology outlined by Saldaña (2016). Initially, we exploratively coded and used a combination of process, causation, values, emotion, and in vivo coding, which yielded first-order categories close to the original text. After all the interviews were coded and first-order categories consolidated, a second coding cycle took place in which we merged the first-order codes into theoretically informed second-

order themes. In the last step, we aggregated the second-order themes into broader dimensions to compare the two samples. The country samples were analyzed separately, which meant that separate sets of codes emerged from the samples. The samples were compared only after the individual sample analysis was completed, and we had a robust understanding of each sample (Harrison & Parker, 2010). As a result, when we speak of vocabularies, we do not merely speak of the logic that connects different codes into categories—instead, we refer to the shared narratives that permeate these categories as capillaries, so to speak, informing an internal logic of shared experience and signaling fidelity to a certain cultural strategy (Giorgi et al., 2015).

## Findings

### *Perceptions of the Information Environment*

Because the German participants generally expressed high trust in legacy media—particularly in the public broadcasting service and press—their experience with media was characterized by the ease of access to quality information and a recognition of the role media plays in a democracy. The German participants' relationship with media and politics was quite contrary to the Serbian sample. Regardless of their political alignment, the Serbian participants criticized the mainstream media, including the public broadcasting service, for being highly politically biased, for not acting in the public's interest, and for helping the ruling class advance their goals. For example, Milutin's (28, male) description of what consuming news is like resonated with many respondents: "when someone … is beating you on the head with a brick."

We did not offer the participants any definition of "d/misinformation" or "junk news." Instead, we framed our questions around "falsehoods" and "suspicious content," so the participants used their own words, including *fake news* ("lažne vesti"), *lies* ("laži," "Lügen"), *fabrications* ("izmišljotine"), *propaganda*, and *disinformation* ("dezinformacije," "Desinformation"). For the German participants, falsehoods were related to right-wing opinions (mostly associated with the right-wing party *Alternative für Deutschland*), purposely false information distributed by dubious sources, and comments made by fake accounts and trolls. This finding resonates with recent scholarship that shows that disinformation in Germany has mainly appeared in the context of problems allegedly caused by immigration from Islamic countries (Zimmermann & Kohring, 2020). While information disorder was

confined to the online sphere for the German participants, the entire information environment was in a state of disorder for the Serbian participants. This difference supports our assumption and previous research that citizens in media systems with different levels of permeability for junk news have distinct perceptions of information disorder.

According to most Serbian participants, the government is spreading disinformation to cultivate hostilities against the political opposition and divert attention from its corruption, and the government agenda is advanced by tabloids and mainstream TV channels. Živko (27, male) explained his understanding of how state propaganda operates:

> It goes like this: they … literally make up the news and put it on the cover page of *Informer* [the most read pro-government tabloid]. Say Đilas [last name of a prominent oppositional politician and a businessman] ate a child. In the news at 18:30 on TV, there is a five-minute story about how he ate a child. … The SNS [ruling party] politicians … come on TV and say, "We will fight to protect all children from Đilas." … And you watch it all day, you see it on TV, people share it online. And you're convinced because, you know, if everyone's talking about it, it's impossible that all these people are lying. But it is possible. … And that is literally taken for a fact after two or three days.

In both samples, two groups of citizens were found to contribute to the proliferation of falsehoods: *citizen perpetrators* and *citizen victims*. The former refers to those who disseminate disinformation, for example, because they sympathize with or support the right-wing ideology and consciously disregard the truth because "it doesn't matter to them" (Natascha, 25, female). Citizen victims, on the other hand, are victims *and* perpetrators of misinformation, not out of evil intent but because of their lack of news media competence. For example, the Serbian participants generally believed that most of their fellow citizens had little education or understanding of politics beyond scandalization, making them the "perfect victims" (Maja, female, 22). The notion of citizen victims resonates with the term "infodemically vulnerable," a term coined in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic to describe citizens who make little use of news and do not trust the media, which makes them more prone to believing falsehoods (Nielsen et al., 2020).

Interestingly, the Serbian participants also believed that anyone could become a victim. It was common to express a mixture of compassion for and annoyance at citizens who

lacked the capability to navigate the Serbian information environment. The German participants, in contrast, were far less forgiving to citizen victims, often expressing anger and dismay at the thought of populist actors gaining power because of citizens' inability to resist propaganda.

### *Vocabularies of informed citizenship in Serbia and Germany*

During the analysis, it quickly became apparent that participants' thinking about informed citizenship was deeply engrained in a context in which the disorder persisted, particularly in connection to social media use. Notwithstanding the differences in the respondents' perceptions of their information environments, we could conceptualize the vocabularies of informed citizenship around certain shared dimensions, which are shown in Table 2 and elaborated on in the following sections.

#### Informed Citizenship as an Individual Effort

Most of the German participants considered informing oneself to be one of the primary duties of citizens and did not see much leeway here. It was common to recognize how specific topics on the political agenda and in the media related to one's own life, which was then a "good enough" reason to invest time in informing oneself—at least from time to time. Only one participant refused to follow the news, repeatedly explaining that causes important to her were not represented in the media: "Everything I need to know I see at work every day …. No one writes about that" (Lisa, 26, female).

Table S1-2. Vocabularies of Informed Citizenship

| *Level* | *Practices* | *Normative beliefs* | *Vocabulary* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Individual* | Informed citizenship as an individual practice | Informed citizenship as individual responsibility | Individual effort |
| *Social* | Informed citizenship as a relational practice | Informed citizenship as a shared responsibility | Collective social effort |

Altogether—and reflecting the common democratic ideals prominent in the vertical perspective on citizenship—informed citizenship was conceived as an individual's duty toward democracy because it allows one to cast an informed ballot and hold the government accountable in the case of any wrongdoing. Yet, the most dominant reason for having an informed opinion was found to be self-defense against manipulation by right-wing actors.

Sabrina's (34, female) account is especially telling: "If one informs oneself, one has a basis ... a consolidated opinion of one's own. Even if a new group forms, which advocates another opinion … you do not become a blind follower so fast."

In the Serbian sample, the opinions were divided. More than half of the sample considered informing oneself to be the "ground zero of citizenship" (Ivan, 27, male), something that an individual who is part of a wider community owes to the community[3]. For others, however, informed citizenship did not play an essential role in their self-understanding as citizens. For example, Marko (27, male) avidly followed news about football and gas prices but considered reading information about politics a matter of personal choice, one he opted against (cf., Thorson, 2015). Because most people in the sample did not have a sense of discourse ownership and the ability to hold the government accountable, not informing oneself was a widespread and somewhat acceptable coping strategy to navigate daily life (Aharoni et al., 2021; Palmer & Toff, 2020).

Furthermore, and in contrast to the accessibility of news in the German sample, everyone in the Serbian sample, even those with the highest level of information and news media literacy, informing themselves was exhausting: "a lot of time and a lot of nerves, [which] in a way diminishes the value [of being informed]" (Luka, 23, male). The shared perception of the dysfunctional information environment underscores the contextual necessity of occasional and self-protective news avoidance (Aharoni et al., 2021) and partially relieves citizens of their duty to inform themselves.

Notwithstanding, in both information environments, those who do not perform their role properly—either purposely or because of a lack of resources—were seen as being at the center of the information disorder. Accordingly, the capacity for individual resilience to junk news emerged as one of the prominent aspects of informed citizenship in the digital era. Individual resilience is mirrored in an understanding of informed citizenship as an individual effort that we inductively conceptualized as consisting of four strategies. Following Tandoc et al.'s (2018) categorization, the internal strategies included relying on one's intuition (also in Swart & Broersma, 2022) and efforts to nurture certain habits, such as consuming a diverse news diet and paying attention to trustworthiness heuristics, such as news source and grammar. The relevant external strategies when one doubted certain news (Tandoc et al., 2018) included validating the content by cross-referencing, consulting fact-checking websites

[3] On that note, the Serbian participants mostly spoke about "community" or "society" rather than "democracy," which was very common in the German sample.

and asking friends, and removing junk spreaders from one's social media feed. We found minor differences in the concrete practices within these categories. For example, the interviews showed that politically interested Serbian participants consciously engaged in cross-referencing as a way to "find the truth in the cracks between [the outlets]" (Marko, 27, male) and did so more than the German participants, who routinely read a few news outlets without explicitly comparing them in the search for truth. In contrast, the German participants relied more strongly on the credibility heuristics of the media, such as familiarity and image (Swart & Broersma, 2022).

Despite the similarities in the practices that comprised individual effort, the two groups differed in their expectations about individual resilience. Given their normatively laden understanding of informed citizenship as an individual duty toward democracy and the perceived convenience of access to news, the German participants largely considered developing resilience as a "doable" imperative if only people "tried harder." This view strongly reflects the common conceptualizations of informed citizenship as entrenched in rationality (Swart & Broersma, 2022). This was less true for the Serbian participants, who considered individual resilience to be wishful thinking, given the ubiquity of dis- and misinformation, dysfunction of the media system, and overall low education levels. Instead of counting on individual capacities, the Serbian participants believed that better conditions could come about only as a result of changes in the political and media systems, and that until then they would rely on and invest in their friends and contacts to uphold the practice of informed citizenship.

### Informed Citizenship as a Relational Practice

Although "individual" implies "alone" and the practice of consuming news is typically solitary in both samples, informing oneself with and through others was common. In the German sample, discussing news with others was considered a substantial part of informed citizenship. The participants reported engaging in political discussions with their friends and family regularly. Discussion functioned as a way of getting to know what they thought about issues and developed empathy for those with different perspectives and understandings. This underscores that informed citizenship is a "discursive interactional process" rather than "atomized individuals, consuming media in their homes" (Dahlgren, 2005, p. 149). For discussions to be meaningful and empowering, however, the participants expected people to first inform themselves to be able to engage in an opinion-forming

political discussion and to adhere to the norms of discussion—particularly, respect for different opinions. The participants typically juxtaposed online discussions with strangers and discussions with friends and acquaintances (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Thorson, 2014). They described the former as lacking in meaningful social connections and discussion norms, and the latter as more pleasant because, notwithstanding the content of the discussion, in the end, "we say that we all like each other and all is good" (Patrick, 33, male).

Among the Serbian participants, political discussions were not found to be integral to informed citizenship. Expressing a similar sentiment as that of the young people in Ekström's (2016) study on everyday political talk, where politics was considered an "unsafe" topic, one participant said that "you don't discuss politics with your friends because you know it's not going to end well" (Milutin, 29, male). Several participants thus refrained from discussions as a way of preserving social relationships (Eliasoph, 2003). Instead, informed citizenship comprised consuming news and *informing* others. It was thus less important to engage argumentatively with people on a particular topic but rather to ensure they had the "right" information to form an opinion. Grounded in the participants' observations that many people informed themselves "wrongly" or not at all, informed citizenship as a relational practice functioned as a form of help for those who were misinformed or were at risk of being misinformed. Mutual help was widely accepted and welcomed. In contrast, although most German participants appreciated being informed by others on social media, they reacted "allergic" to others who tried to educate them. Natascha (25, female) criticized this as "a typical quirk … going around being a smartass."

In both samples, informed citizenship was embedded in social relations, yet it was structured around different practices and norms. In the language of cultural sociology, we can say that informed citizenship is shaped by certain boundaries consisting of practices and understandings that designate social relations as appropriate or inappropriate (Zelizer, 2012, p. 146). When we consider informed citizenship as a social relation, we recognize it as a set of relational practices that serve to advance the objective to inform oneself—and not simply as a social behavior for its own sake (Bandelj, 2012). Across the two countries, informed citizenship entailed relational work in the sense that people engage in processes through which these relations come to be, are maintained, or are dissolved (Zelizer, 2012). Ekström (2016) also hinted at this when he described political talk as a *social* achievement. In this sense, it is telling that "unfriending" was found to be a common way to deal with people who spread misinformation among the German participants, thus terminating a social relationship

due to a violation of the norm to inform oneself properly. In contrast, the Serbian participants were rather reluctant to unfriend people "just because they are misinformed" (Klara, 27, female).

Relevant to the networked environments of social media, one's own actions were seen as having implications for others, as Sabrina (34, female) explained: "I believe that many people just randomly press the like button and do not even know that in this way they give this article a huge value and weighting." Similarly, the Serbian participants routinely complained about people who mindlessly shared whatever they came across:

> People are bored and uneducated … so they shoot all sorts of idiotic links in chat groups, on social media, everywhere … For me, it's easy, I just hide them, but my mom … I ask her "Where did you get that [information]", and she always tells me this or that neighbor posted it, so she believes it. I saw her feed; it's full of just plain wrong stuff. (Maja, 22, female)

Both examples illustrate the interdependency of informed citizenship in networked environments, where the misbehavior of a few has an impact on what others see in their personal information environments. In such instances, informed citizenship highly depends on the ability and motivation to curate personal feeds (Thorson et al., 2018) and having access to social networks that could intervene (Moe, 2020).

### Informed Citizenship as a Collective Social Effort

Grounded in people's observations that citizens play a central role in disseminating dis- and misinformation, we found two relational strategies to navigate information disorder: prevention and intervention.

Most respondents underlined the individual duty to engage in preventive behavior when posting something, such as ensuring that the content is trustworthy. A commonly used metaphor was "sweeping before your door" to indicate that if everyone minded what they consumed, posted, or shared (as opposed to mindlessly liking and sharing), online environments would be less polluted. Being aware that mere engagement with junk content could contribute to its virality, some participants advocated ignoring falsehoods so that they "die away with no clicks, no comments, no retweets" (Natalija, 19, female). At the same time, ignoring falsehoods stood in conflict with the urge that many participants had to intervene against junk news by pointing to the falseness of the allegations and/or providing

further information sources (Gagrčin et al., 2022). Reporting was the most common intervention, although most people were not convinced that it had any effect; hence, many did it, for example, just to "calm one's own consciousness" (Jennifer, 29, female). The Serbian respondents found mocking falsehoods posted by friends and acquaintances on social media to be an effective and "amusing" way to voice criticism. In their effort to "protect the people from stupid opinions" (Nemanja, 29, male) on social media, the participants relied on help from other users: "If [a counter-comment] is in the top comments, on Facebook at least, then there are definitely a hundred people who join you" (Laura, 21, female).

The groups differed significantly regarding the responsibility of responding to misinformation online. Resonating with research from other national contexts (e.g., Tandoc et al., 2018), everyone recognized that such interventions' efficacy is minor because "it is difficult to change people" and because social media is not considered suitable for constructive debates. Most German participants refrained from intervening and instead hid, deleted, or unfollowed misinformation spreaders. A few participants felt obliged to react to falsehoods and were motivated by the need to counter the pollution of the public discourse (Gagrčin et al., 2022). In stark contrast, most Serbian participants expressed a sense of responsibility, frequently termed as "moral obligation," to engage with the citizen victims of falsehoods, especially if these were friends or acquaintances. However, in contrast to the justification for intervention provided by the German participants that focused on the democratic public discourse, the Serbian participants explained their urge to intervene as a "basic human empathy that we should all have innated: … to protect the oppressed, to try to help someone who is in trouble in some way" (Jovica, 33, male). Finally, we observed that the boundaries of informed citizenship are set differently. Although both samples emphasized individual agency in the collective effort to prevent the spread of falsehoods, the Serbian participants set their boundaries wider to include correcting and educating others.

Based on these illustrations, informed citizenship can be understood as a collective social effort. Inspired by the term "collective social correction" (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022), informed citizenship as a collective social effort articulates the idea about mutually enabled and enabling information practices, including and a shared responsibility to prevent and counteract the spread of junk news.

## Discussion

In this study, we examined how people in two different information environments think about and practice informed citizenship in light of information disorder and digital media affordances. Our findings show that the people in the examined information environments experience information disorder differently, which aligns with the practical and normative emphasis given to vocabularies of informed citizenship as an individual and collective social effort. Notwithstanding these differences, the findings underscore the relevance of informed citizenship as a horizontal civic matter. This section presents two theoretical considerations that emerged from the findings.

### *Toward a Social Ontology of Informed Citizenship*

Informed citizenship is traditionally treated as a vertical norm—a sense of responsibility that individuals feel toward the polity—which is relevant mainly as a prerequisite for institutional participation, such as voting. Extending this perspective by employing a cultural approach to citizenship (Dahlgren, 2006), we conceptualized informed citizenship as a relational practice and horizontal civic norm.

First, we found that becoming informed requires a sounding board. Accordingly, citizens form and nurture social relations that are instrumental to informed citizenship. Expanding on previous research (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Palmer & Toff, 2020; Wagner et al., 2021), we showed that informed citizenship is inherently social; as such, it entails the relational work needed to create, uphold, or dissolve relationships related to practicing informed citizenship. Belonging to communities that value informed citizenship provides social incentives, and these communities can regulate deviant practices by imposing social norms (Palmer & Toff, 2020; Vraga et al., 2021). Furthermore, the networked nature of citizens' public connections enables citizens not only to inform people but also to observe when they are misinformed and to intervene accordingly. In such a complex environment, the division of labor should be understood as a social component of informed citizenship (Moe, 2020) that manifests in two ways: as an individual commitment to prevent the proliferation of falsehoods and as a collective effort to protect each other and the discourse.

Our findings point to the boundaries of vertical political ontology, focusing on the atomized rational individual. Political communication scholarship would benefit from the social ontological view of informed citizenship. First, social ontology recognizes that individuals are shaped by the relations in which they partake, and that these relations are highly contextual (Frega, 2019b; Dahlgren, 2006). Second, it posits that the normative

properties that emerge from social relations "cannot be reduced to nor derived from the normative properties of either individuals or structures," such as institutions or democratic theory (Frega, 2019b, p. 163). In this line of thought, Ekström (2016), for example, noted that political talk is *social* rather than a normatively charged *deliberative* achievement. Our study goes a step further, suggesting a view of informed citizenship as a collective social effort. Besides the social aspect, this view entails a normative aspect that takes note of people's normative beliefs related to informed citizenship as a shared endeavor. It also conveys more than a description of an outcome; informed citizenship as a collective social effort is a proceeding relation prescribing that one should engage *with others* and prevent the spread of junk content *for the sake of others* (imagined both as individuals and as a collective). Like democracy, becoming informed is a never-ending effort that should be treated as a process instead of an achievement.

Resonating with the studies that employed a social approach, we offer new conceptual frames for understanding and assessing informed citizenship in complex and disorderly environments. For example, the notions of social verification practices (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022; Waruwu et al., 2021), the meso-news-space (Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020), or informed citizenship as a habit (Palmer & Toff, 2020) could all be treated as horizontal civic matters of informed citizenship that unfold specific contextual norms relevant for understanding how democracy functions today.

### *Role of Information Environments in Informed Citizenship*

Our findings portray two distinct information disorders. For the German participants, the information disorder was located online. They had a clearly defined "Other" in the form of right-wing groups and individuals whom they considered the main perpetrators of information disorder. By seeing the disorder as a right-wing attack on democracy, the participants could clearly draw boundaries of informed citizenship between the citizen perpetrators of disorder, the citizen victims of disorder, and themselves as endeavoring participants in democracy (cf. Lindell, 2020). The presumably higher permeability of media systems for junk news (Serbian case) resulted in more pronounced experiences with information disorder. For the Serbian participants, disorder was the default mode of their entire information environment, stemming primarily from the political and media elite as a means of enriching and reproducing power at the expense of ordinary citizens.

The information environment played a role in setting expectations for individual resilience against information disorder and in emphasizing individuals' responsibility and tolerance of news avoidance (Toff & Kalogeropoulos, 2020) and illustrating distinct civic cultures of news consumption (Pasitselska, 2022). Related to the notion of informed citizenship as a collective social effort, the German respondents expressed a more individual understanding of citizenship where other citizens were seen as part of a *discourse* community. Hence, prevention and intervention were the methods for upholding a shared discourse. On the other hand, the Serbian respondents shared a sense of citizenship as a *fate* community (*Schicksalsgemeinschaft*) connected through a shared struggle; hence, the responsibility for prevention and intervention was not related to the democratic discourse but a struggle to protect oneself and one's community from the political establishment. The more disorderly the perception of the information environment, the more people displayed informed citizenship as a collective social effort in their ideals of democratic citizenship. We conclude that weak institutions and low trust in media may create a sense of informational uncertainty that requires stronger civic compensation. Although our study's generalizability is limited, given its boundedness to two media systems, we believe that our results, especially those from the Serbian context, may be helpful to understand informed citizenship in countries with more repressive regimes and stricter censorship.

Our results should be interpreted carefully also because of the age group of our participants. We interviewed mainly millennials who grew up with the internet, a group that certainly shares sociocultural experiences that may be different from other media generations. In general, research on democratic norms and ideals in the digital age should pay more attention to digital infrastructures' embeddedness in larger vocabularies, media systems, and political struggles. For example, it would be relevant to understand how access to and consumption of foreign and transnational media shape (alternative) vocabularies of informed citizenship in repressive regimes. In any case, considering the state of democracies worldwide, inquiries into citizens' perspectives on democracy continue to be profoundly relevant because, as Stoycheff (2020) poignantly noted, "[t]oday's democratic reversal is not a grandiose political upheaval, but rather a quiet and persistent chipping away at its core norms and values" (p. 12).

## STUDY 2. 'Who, If Not *Me*?' How Political Self-Categorizations Shape the Meaning of Political Self-Expression on Social Media as a Citizenship Norm[4]

Gagrčin, E. (2023). 'Who , if not me ?' How political self-categorizations shape the meaning of political self-expression on social media as a citizenship norm. *Information, Communication & Society*. https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2174792

**You have to purchase this study online.**

[4] The study was presented at the 72nd ICA Annual Conference, 2022.

## STUDY 3. Your Social Ties, Your Personal Public Sphere, Your Responsibility: How Users Construe a Sense of Personal Responsibility for Intervention Against Uncivil Comments on Facebook[5]

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### Abstract

User intervention against incivility is a significant element of democratic norm enforcement on social media, and feeling personally responsible for acting is a vital prerequisite for intervention. However, our insight into how users construe their sense of personal responsibility and expectations of other users remains limited. By theoretically foregrounding user perspective, this study investigates the boundaries and nuances of user responsibility to intervene against incivility. Empirically, it draws on 20 qualitative vignette interviews with young people in Germany. The findings show that as contexts collapse in users' newsfeeds, the imagined boundaries of personal public spheres and own social relationships with uncivil users serve as heuristics for hierarchizing and delimiting personal responsibility to intervene. Beyond abstract individual responsibility for the public discourse, practical responsibility is distributed among personal public spheres.

### Introduction

Uncivil discourse online is a growing concern among citizens and scholars alike, as it pollutes the public discourse and has exclusionary implications for minority participation (A. A. Anderson et al., 2014; Porten-Cheé et al., 2020; Ziegele et al., 2020). Of the numerous platforms available, users are most likely to encounter hateful content on Facebook (Reichelmann et al., 2021). Although Facebook recently introduced measures such as automated content moderation (Meta, 2021, 2022), technological solutions for countering incivility and hate fall short when contextual interpretation is required (Gillespie, 2010; Meta, 2022; Siapera & Viejo-Otero, 2021). Given the amount of problematic content that remains

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on the platform (Giansiracusa, 2021; Timberg, 2021), ordinary users as co-constructors of social media environments remain relevant for restoring favorable conditions for political discourse (Friess et al., 2020; J. W. Kim et al., 2021; Masullo et al., 2019; Meta, 2022; Porten-Cheé et al., 2020; Ziegele et al., 2020)

A sense of personal responsibility is vital in prompting individuals to intervene against incivility (Latané & Darley, 1970; Ziegele et al., 2020). This has been illustrated by research into the social movement #iamhere, in which users are motivated to engage by a sense of responsibility for the public discourse (Ziegele et al., 2020). Other studies have indicated that some users intervene out of solidarity (Kunst et al., 2021a) or for altruistic reasons (Wang & Kim, 2020). However, user intervention against incivility is overall not that common. For example, repeated representative surveys in Germany have shown that while most people believe standing up to discrimination and hate speech to be a sign of good citizenship, only a minority report intervening upon encountering these online (Emmer et al., 2021; Heger et al., 2022; Schaetz et al., 2020). This suggests that regular users either do not feel a concrete sense of personal responsibility to act or have a different understanding of responsibility altogether. Nevertheless, despite studies demonstrating the pivotal role of personal responsibility for intervention (Latané & Darley, 1970; Ziegele et al., 2020), our understanding of how regular users make sense of their role in combating incivility is surprisingly limited. I argue that it is also obscured by our normative approach to studying user intervention, which is grounded in scholarly imaginaries of the online public sphere and a perspective on individual action as decoupled from the social context in which it occurs (Dahlgren, 2006) .

Since users experience public discourse on Facebook through their news feeds, where different public, private, political, and social contexts converge (Marwick & boyd, 2011), I theorize that understanding users' perceptions of responsibility requires considering other everyday social media experiences known to shape sociability and informal political talk. Drawing on the literature on online boundary, relational and impression management, I investigate how Facebook users construe a sense of personal responsibility to intervene against incivility in the context of their everyday social media use. Based on 20 vignette interviews with students in Germany, this study shows that users feel most strongly compelled to intervene when incivility occurs in what they perceive as their *personal public sphere*—a delineated communicative space of their own that intersects with and is visible to others, which creates the need for impression management and a sense of personal

accountability (John & Gal, 2018). In this space, an intervention is considered comparably more meaningful and efficacious because it involves significant social ties, as opposed to intervening in news media comment sections that involve unknown users. Thus, the boundaries of one's personal public sphere and social relatedness to uncivil users serve as heuristics for thinking about the practical and immediate responsibility to intervene. The findings remind us that not everything that we (both as scholars and social media users) deem normatively desirable is practically feasible, appropriate, or immediately important in the context of everyday social media use. This study contributes to a further understanding of discursive civic responsibility by offering a perspective on responsibility as distributed among ‚proprietors' of *personal* public spheres rather than as diffused among individual bystanders in *the* public sphere.

## Literature review

### *Incivility and intervention in user comments*

Social media platforms afford different opportunities for political talk and self-expression (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). On Facebook, in particular, informal political talk features prominently in user comments. Scholars have argued in support of comments' democratic benefits (Freelon, 2010), even when they do not conform to standards of rationality and politeness(Rossini, 2022). In contrast, an increasing amount of *uncivil* discourse in user comments has been seen as troubling (Anderson et al., 2014; Reichelmann et al., 2021). As a mode of expression that 'signals moral disrespect and profound disregard toward individuals or groups' (Rossini, 2022, p. 7), incivility can be viewed as disregarding democratic values such as pluralism (Rossini, 2022) and violating moral (Neubaum, Cargnino, Winter, et al., 2021) and/or communicative norms (Bormann et al., 2021). As a counternormative behavior, incivility is likely to attract condemnation, censure, and punishment by relevant audiences (Watson et al., 2019).

Platforms offer different modalities for sanctioning incivility. Besides reporting uncivil content to Facebook as a violation of the platform's Community Guidelines (Meta, 2022; Siapera & Viejo-Otero, 2021), users can voice their disapproval by reacting to uncivil comments with angry emojis or through counter-commenting (Masullo & Kim, 2021; Porten-Cheé et al., 2020). By engaging in such interventions, 'people seek to voice their own opinions to correct the "wrongs" they perceive in the public sphere' (Barnidge & Rojas,

2014, p. 136) and aim to ‘ensure an inclusive online public discourse’ (Porten-Cheé et al., 2020, p. 519). In this context, the bystander intervention model postulates that feeling a sense of *personal* responsibility to act is a vital prerequisite for intervention, followed by a decision on how to intervene *appropriately* (Latané & Darley, 1970; Ziegele et al., 2020). A prominent explanation for user inaction is the so-called bystander effect, according to which the presence of others leads to a diffusion of responsibility and results in a disinclination to act (Latané & Darley, 1970).

To date, the most nuanced insights into users’ ideas of personal responsibility stem from research into the social movement #iamhere, in the context of which users engage in collective intervention to promote a cultivated discourse on Facebook (Buerger, 2021; Friess et al., 2020; Ziegele et al., 2020). These users report being motivated by a sense of personal responsibility for the public discourse (Ziegele et al., 2020). Most people in Germany approve of this kind of engagement. Repeated representative surveys show that over 70% of respondents believe that standing up to hate and discrimination is good citizenship (Emmer et al., 2021; Schaetz et al., 2020). However, activists and non-activists arguably differ in their mindsets and in their abilities to sustain a sense of responsibility and motivation for (collective) action (Passy & Monsch, 2020), and only a minority of the survey respondents report actually having intervened upon encountering incivility (Emmer et al., 2021; Heger et al., 2022).

From a normative point of view, #iamhere’s engagement appeals to some of the central premises of research into bystander intervention against incivility: (1) news media comment sections are central spaces for public deliberation online, (2) users act in their role as citizens, (3) users are equals in social media environments, entitled to sanction each other based on their horizontal relationship as citizens (Dishon & Ben-Porath, 2018). However, there are good reasons to believe that other aspects of mediated social life on Facebook inform users‘ ideas about responsibility for intervention. Extant literature suggests that users’ perceptions of self and others in different social roles shape not only the choreography of social interactions (Baym & Boyd, 2012; Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021; Marwick & boyd, 2011; McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012) but also people’s notions of citizenship (Gagrčin and Porten-Cheé, forthcoming; Gagrčin et al., 2022). In the following, I consider how spatial and social aspects of everyday social media experience may shape regular users’ sense of personal responsibility to intervene against incivility.

### *Public sphere(s)*

Studies have typically focused on incivility in user comments on news organizations' websites and social media pages due to their attributed function as deliberative public spaces (e.g., Freelon, 2010; Y. Kim, 2021; Stroud et al., 2015; Watson et al., 2019). However, this does not necessarily resonate with how users imagine and navigate social media environments. More than a decade ago, Papacharissi (2010, p. 17) argued that social media would blur the boundaries between public and private spaces in a way that alters 'the actual and imagined spaces upon which citizenship is practiced.' Studies have demonstrated that users are more likely to interact with their Friends' news posts than posts on news Pages (Wells & Thorson, 2017), which challenges the notion of *the* public sphere where political talk online occurs and, relatedly, user responsibility to intervene out of responsibility for *the* public discourse. Moreover, John and Gal (2018) have found that users do not necessarily imagine or experience Facebook as one big public sphere but rather as a more delineated *personal* public sphere—a communicative space of their own with specific boundaries. How users visualize these boundaries presumably differs between platforms (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). On Facebook, the personal public sphere can include users' profiles, news feeds, and friends lists. Aware that their personal public sphere intersects with others' personal public spheres, users believe they have both the right and the obligation to regulate and curate content and interactions based on their own norms and values (John & Agbarya, 2021; John & Gal, 2018; Schmidt, 2014).

### *Face-work and relational work*

The backbone of the personal public sphere concept is the centrality of face-work and relational work in the context of mediated social life (John & Gal, 2018; Schwarz & Shani, 2016). In everyday social interactions, individuals engage in face-work by acting according to their perceptions of audience expectations to maintain 'the positive social value they claim for themselves' (Goffman, 1967, p. 5). Face-work is particularly laborious on Facebook. As different spheres of life converge, face-work is done before multiple audiences simultaneously: close ties, such as friends and family members, and more distant ties, such as acquaintances from school or friends of friends (Baym and boyd, 2012; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Schwarz and Shani, 2016). At the same time, however, the audience on Facebook is not visible to users. Instead, how users *imagine* their audience is crucial to their situational public self-awareness and perceptions of behavioral expectations (Litt, 2012; Mor et al.,

2015). Here, users' *civic* role is but one of many social roles that users may assume when thinking about what is expected of them.

A ‚mismanagement' of the online self may have real-life consequences—particularly for interpersonal relationships (John & Agbarya, 2021; Mor et al., 2015). Faced with an uncertain reception, some users pre-emptively engage in self-censorship or abstain from political talk and self-expression to avoid conflict and mitigate risks (Pearce et al., 2018; Vraga et al., 2015). Others yet unfriend social ties for posting problematic content—either because they do not want to see that kind of content anymore or because they do not want to be associated with those users (Gagrčin et al., 2022; John & Agbarya, 2021; John & Gal, 2018).

Interventions such as counterspeaking are arguably more confrontational than political unfriending and can be seen as socially delicate endeavors. In contrast to the idea that users are entitled to sanction each other based on their horizontal relationship as citizens (Dishon & Ben-Porrath, 2018), social relationships shape perceptions of who is responsible for intervening (Moisuc & Brauer, 2019; Strimling & Eriksson, 2014). Research shows that in the presence of both friends and strangers, friends—not strangers—are expected to sanction (Eriksson, Andersson, et al., 2017; Strimling & Eriksson, 2014). At the same time, our relationships influence how we judge and react to norm violations (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012), and people tend to be harsher toward distant ties as opposed to close ones (Lieberman & Linke, 2007; Neubaum, Cargnino, Winter, et al., 2021). Thus, the need for face-work and relational work may motivate and/or constrain one's sense of responsibility to act against incivility.

To better understand how personal responsibility compels users to counter incivility, I conceptualize responsibility not only in terms of desirability (what a good citizen would do) but also in terms of behavioral expectations that individuals perceive and place upon themselves and others (Cialdini et al., 1991), and ask the following questions:

*What is the role of personal public sphere(s) (RQ1), impression management (RQ2), and social relatedness (RQ3) in people's expectations of user intervention against incivility on social media?*

## Methods

### *Study context*

In contrast to the United States, where the First Amendment to its constitution guarantees freedom of speech, the German Constitution perpetuates the idea that 'to protect democracy itself it may be necessary to forbid some forms of speech, namely speech that counters the very premises of the democratic system'(Riedl et al., 2021, p. 437). Additionally, Germany's Network Enforcing Act provides users with critical agency in social media environments by requiring platforms to delete problematic content, for example, when flagged by users (Heldt, 2019). Perhaps unsurprisingly, a recent study has indicated that Germans have comparably higher expectations of governmental regulation of hate speech and incivility online than Americans and assume comparably higher levels of personal responsibility for intervention (Riedl et al., 2021). Thus, Germany provides an ideal context for exploring how users practically construe this responsibility.

Facebook is a relevant case for several reasons. In addition to introducing artificial intelligence to detect hate speech, Facebook still relies on the idea of self-regulation, expecting users to proactively report content that they believe violates the Community Guidelines (Meta, 2022). After the reported success of automated hate speech detection was repeatedly called into question (most recently by whistleblower Frances Haugen), proactive norm enforcement on the part of users has become particularly important (Giansiracusa, 2021; Timberg, 2021). Lastly, because users are more likely to encounter hateful content on Facebook than on other platforms (Reichelmann et al., 2021), users may feel that Facebook is a space in particular need of user intervention.

### *Participants*

The study draws upon 20 semi-structured interviews with German university students ages 20-25. The decision to study this sample was based on the following considerations: First, young people use social media for political purposes more commonly than older adults (Andersen et al., 2020; Emmer et al., 2021). Second, studies have shown that younger and wealthier people are more likely to intervene (Watson et al., 2019). The participants were recruited via university email lists, where they registered and filled out a pre-screening questionnaire. The questionnaire aimed to recruit a diverse sample of respondents and avoid intervention enthusiasts' self-selection bias. In the final sample, most participants self-identified as rare interveners; only three identified as occasional interveners. The average age is 22, with 40% of participants self-identifying as male and 60% as female. All participants used at least two social media platforms daily and had Facebook profiles. I use pseudonyms

chosen by the participants to report on the study, and I have translated the quotes used into English.

### *Interviews*

Vignette interviews were employed as the standalone method in this study because the method is suitable for constructivist approaches that explore participants' ethical frameworks and moral codes (Gray et al., 2017; Wilks, 2004). The participants were presented with two fictional Facebook posts with accompanying texts (see Appendix in online publication). The first depicted incivility in the comment section below a news post on a user profile (representing personal space on Facebook). The second instance of incivility was situated in the comment section below a news post on a German news outlet's Page (representing public space). Based on the literature showing that people recognize impoliteness much more easily than incivility (Kalch & Naab, 2017), both uncivil comments were formulated as polite. Because I was interested in how people define their responsibility to intervene, I needed to ensure that participants perceived the comments as uncivil—a step that precedes defining responsibility in the bystander intervention model (Ziegele et al., 2020). As previous research has indicated that abusive language directed at social groups is considered particularly threatening (Naab et al., 2018; Wilhelm et al., 2020), I chose refugees and people with disabilities as targets of incivility, assuming most participants would likely condemn discrimination against these two groups. The vignettes were tested in five trial interviews to ensure that the situations appeared typical and realistic; following participant feedback, these were further adjusted.

After reading the vignettes, the participants assessed the situation, after which they were asked to take on several roles in different relationship constellations (Gray et al., 2017; O'Dell et al., 2012). For example, I asked participants what they believed the post owner ought to do in a situation in which the deviant was their friend and whether it would make a difference if they were an acquaintance from school or a stranger. I encouraged participants to reminisce and reflect on similar situations that had happened to them or that they had observed. Though I had concerns about whether the participants would be able to switch from one role to another, it was surprisingly effortless for most of them.

The interviews were conducted via video conferencing platforms and lasted approximately 80 minutes. Only audio was recorded. Student assistants transcribed the interviews, and I coded them. The analysis was conducted according to Saldaña (2016). In

the first step, I exploratively coded a subset of interviews (n=5) using in-vivo and versus coding to develop the initial codes list. Because I was interested in responsibility not only in terms of desirability but also in terms of social expectations (Cialdini et al., 1991)**,** I coded the former as actions that participants *wished would* happen, would *ideally* happen, or were *theoretically important*, and the latter in terms of *must*, *should*, and *ought to do*. In the second stage, I consolidated the codes according to the roles, rules, and relationships in Saldaña and Omasta (2018) and applied them to the rest of the interviews.

## Findings

Similar to the ideas about responsibility reported and conceptualized in the literature, participants recognized incivility as problematic and worrisome. Most shared the view that responding to incivility is, in principle, a civic responsibility, corroborating the findings of other interview studies (Ziegele et al., 2020). However, participants stressed that this was, first and foremost, an abstract responsibility—something that one would *ideally* do—adding that there were many limitations and good reasons *not to act* upon this responsibility in practice. For example, participants believed the vignettes were likely to produce conflict. Franziska (25) was certain: 'It's about to get a lot more unpleasant … someone will feel attacked, especially if they know each other.' In this sense, participants frequently emphasized that intervention requires a great deal of time and emotional resources. However, of greater interest here are the instances in which participants felt that intervention was, in fact, a matter of personal responsibility.

### *Personal public sphere and the responsibility to intervene in public*

Participants placed the strongest expectations for intervention against incivility on the Profile or Page proprietor on whose *territory* incivility occurred. They spoke in terms that concurred with the concept of the personal public sphere and the idea that one has both authority over, and obligations to, others in that delineated communicative space (John & Gal, 2018). Two quotes from participants neatly encapsulate this idea:

> It's simply how Facebook works—it's your account, so whatever you post, it's your platform. And everyone who sees your post in their news feed is exposed to it. So, I think you are responsible for trying to keep your page free of discrimination. (Naomi, 22)

> If you post something about people with disabilities, like in this example, you are also taking on a role to speak for them and their rights. And if someone denigrates them, then I think you should stay on the ball and be able to defend this group and essentially your positions. (Henri, 20)

Both illustrate that the desire to maintain a positive image of oneself creates an expectation that one would and should defend and enforce one's values and positions (John & Gal, 2018). Moreover, the perceptions of the personal public sphere reveal that user intervention is infused with several meanings. As Naomi articulated, the expectation is that users *publicly* signal to their audience that uncivil behavior is not tolerated in their public sphere. This signaling aims to show solidarity with the discriminated group, motivated by the idea of preventing the presumed influence of discriminatory content on the audience (Wang & Kim, 2020; Wintterlin et al., 2021). Participants considered intervention a form of social sanctioning that informs the uncivil user 'that it's not okay to spread hate and lies' (Mark, 21) so that the uncivil user 'experiences public pushback and maybe even realizes that what they said is wrong' (Charlotte, 25).

Despite having asserted that one should not leave incivility in one's personal public sphere unanswered, participants generally bemoaned the hollowness of such interventions. They often complained, 'It's not even a real discussion but a stringing together of statements, where people reduce each other to these single short sentences' (Rebeca, 21). Sharing the same sentiment, many participants described how best to avoid a long discussion upon intervening publicly:

> The problem is that once you comment, it goes back and forth forever [laughs]. And other people interfere as well. And that's why I think it's important to take time to formulate a response so as not to offer much room for further discussion, umm, so that it doesn't drag on and get worse. (Franziska, 25)

These responses indicate that participants were generally not interested in seeking conversation with uncivil users—at least not in the comment section. Instead, they were intervening 'for the record'—so that 'in case someone stumbles upon the post, [the uncivil comment is] not the only comment they see' (Rebeca). By intervening, users consciously

create artifacts for the judgment of audiences, evoking the view of social interaction on social media as an exhibition rather than performance (Hogan, 2010)[6].

The underlying image of the public discourse as an exhibition of fragments from different personal public spheres that constantly flow in and out of our news feed (Marwick and boyd, 2011; Thorson & Wells, 2016) creates a sense of personal responsibility to combat incivility in the *personal* public sphere. As a means of impression management, participants felt the urge to intervene because an absence of intervention was seen as an artifact testifying to users' failure to take care of their personal public sphere and stand up for themselves. They also acknowledged an obligation to other users: recognizing that fragments of their personal public sphere appeared in others' newsfeeds compelled them to enforce discursive norms and ensure a certain quality in their part of the public discourse (Gagrčin et al., 2022; John & Gal, 2018).

***Social relations and responsibility to reform in private***

Social relationships between characters influenced how interviewees read the vignettes and formulated the need and appropriateness of intervention. As Mark poignantly stated, with more distant social ties, '[I]t's so easy to reduce their whole life to this one post and to think that they are idiots or Nazis. But when you've known people, you want to know how they came to think this way.' Because friends are extensions of the self, we generally expect similarity and reciprocity from them (e.g., Hall, 2012). The closer the uncivil user was to the owner of the personal public sphere where incivility occurred, the more likely participants were to read the situation as an issue of disagreement and ground their normative irritation in the difference of opinions and the public display of this difference. Observing a situation in which a friend acts counternormatively produced a sense of cognitive dissonance, which people strove to mitigate by reinterpreting the situation (Festinger, 1957). Consider how May (24) read the situation and negotiated the need for intervention:

> I think if it's an entirely unknown person or just, I don't know, a former acquaintance from school, then you can just delete it and forget it. Now, I'd feel deep disappointment if it's a good friend. I would be like, 'Oh wow, am I friends with the wrong person?' or 'Is this person having a bad day?' So many negative

[6] Nevertheless, I may note that what participants bemoaned as 'intervening for the record' in fact contributes to a more civil and deliberative discourse because it signals descriptive norms (Friess et al., 2020).

> feelings come up … You'd rather teach them or at least try to understand them. With strangers or people who have become strangers to me, I wouldn't give a damn … I would simply delete the comment and forget the person. But you want to get rid of the negative emotions you suddenly have for a friend.

Like May, participants typically emphasized the urge to *reform* the uncivil friend and believed they had an educational task (Hofmann et al., 2018; Neubaum, Cargnino, & Maleszka, 2021). Owing to the common ground they share with their close social ties, participants felt that the legitimacy and influence of their intervention might be comparably significant to that of strangers.

Social proximity with an uncivil user shapes not only the meaning but also the appropriateness of intervention. When directed at distant ties, intervention essentially sanctions uncivil behavior (Tsfati & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2018). Making the uncivil user uncomfortable was arguably one of the goals of the pushback. In contrast, participants were wary of the face threat that a public pushback could cause to their close ties. Thus, participants considered it more appropriate to manage public interventions 'backstage' by talking to uncivil users privately, asking them to remove their uncivil comments, or informing them that they would remove the comments themselves. Mark described this rationale playfully:

> If I knew [the poster], I would definitely first seek a private conversation rather than exposing him so publicly! At the same time, he wrote [the uncivil comment] deliberately. He is accountable for it. But it's like seeing your pal step in dog poop in public, and instead of just going to the person and quietly offering them tissues, you start yelling 'Watch out, dog poop!' and pointing fingers at the person. 'Look, he stepped in dog poop!' That doesn't really help the cause.

Mark's input also reveals a reinterpretation of the situation by framing the uncivil comment as a disagreeable 'incident' that can be overcome if one reacts appropriately. Beyond being a function of relational and impression management, retreating backstage can be seen as an intervention strategy. To have a chance at reforming an uncivil user, the participants believed they must limit the scope of the audience. Lola (20) explained, '[I]f you know [the uncivil user] and you wanted to talk them out of their point of view, you should try to speak to them privately. If you do it publicly, people react with fright or act dismissively.'

Taking a conversation backstage allows for a more intimate atmosphere where 'both can display emotions and insecurities instead of demonizing each other' (Friedrich, 25). In this sense, while public intervention prompts artifact creation, backstage interventions seek to bypass the exhibition character by 're-insert[ing] situational definition into the technically converged experience of political talk' (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 73).

***Boundaries of the personal public sphere and displacement of responsibility***

Finally, perceptions of the personal public sphere inform how people think about personal responsibility and the appropriateness of bystander intervention in others' personal public spheres. Despite a shared belief that bystanders who care for the topic or the group addressed by the uncivil comment would be *inclined* to intervene (Naab et al., 2018; Kunst et al., 2021), participants did not *expect* bystanders to intervene, nor did they express a sense of personal responsibility regarding their intervention when assuming a bystander role. Echoing Naomi's and Henri's input from the beginning of the section, participants' sense of immediate personal responsibility and their expectations toward other users were most pronounced within the boundaries of the personal public sphere and decreased with the perceived social distance from the uncivil user and users whose personal public spheres had been affected.

Research has shown that a fear of embarrassment and being negatively judged by other bystanders hinders intervention (Y. Kim, 2021; van Bommel et al., 2012). In this study, however, the participants were not worried about other bystanders. Instead, they focused on the proprietor of the personal public sphere that had been affected, expressing a great deal of relational discomfort with meddling in their personal public sphere. This was particularly pronounced in relation to 'unnuanced' social ties (Donath, 2007), and participants were hesitant to get involved without knowing the relationship between the users involved in the uncivil incident. One could easily dismiss an assertion such as 'I wouldn't necessarily want to interfere in their relationship' (Timo, 25) as a mere excuse for non-intervening. However, as a recurring explanation for non-intervention, it indicates that user intervention as a social sanction is itself subject to norms, where social proximity functions as a heuristic for construing a sense of responsibility and appropriateness to sanction misbehavior (Moisuc & Brauer, 2019; Strimling & Eriksson, 2014).

Following the logic of a delimited space of responsibility for norm enforcement, participants did not feel responsible for intervening against uncivil comments below news

media outlets' Facebook posts when stumbling upon them in their news feed. Instead, they expected these Pages to allocate sufficient resources to comment moderation and strongly disapproved of their failure to intervene:

> I definitely have a different expectation [of news media Pages] than private people. I mean, they are news providers! They are regularly confronted with [incivility], and they should have a strategy for dealing with that. I get furious when I see the comment section and feel like writing them, 'Hey, what's going on here, why are you allowing this comment? Why don't you block this comment or delete it or whatever!?' (Franziska, 25)

In addition to construing personal responsibility along the boundaries of one's personal public sphere, a lack of urgency to undertake impression management in settings where their actions were not observable by imagined audiences often facilitated inaction. Friedrich explained it this way:

> I scroll through my news feed, see [something uncivil], don't like what I see, but nobody sees that I was there. I don't feel like society expects me to step in there. But, for example, on WhatsApp, people see that I could have reacted to it, so I have to intervene there. Otherwise, they might think I agree with an opinion because of my passive behavior. Or they might judge me: 'Why didn't you react to that if you disagree?'

This is not to say that participants disapproved of bystander intervention. Rather, most believed it was legitimate for bystanders to disengage, displacing responsibility onto the user, Page, or a group of users perceived as responsible for a particular fragment of the public sphere.

**Discussion**

The present study investigated how Facebook users construe personal responsibility to intervene against incivility. In a field dominated by quantitative survey and experimental research, this study offers a sociological and constructivist take on user intervention in that it foregrounds the *social* in social media. Specifically, I explored how social, spatial, and

situational aspects of everyday social media matter for users' understandings of personal responsibility to intervene against incivility.

The study reveals that 'civic territories along which citizens understand and practice their civic duties' (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 16) differ from scholarly modes of imagining the public sphere and formulating expectations of bystander intervention against incivility. As multiple personal public spheres intersect in users' news feeds, rather than being responsible for intervention everywhere and at all times, those perceived as sovereigns in a delimited communicative space—their personal public sphere—are most strongly expected to intervene. Users are considered personally accountable for managing their personal public sphere to the best of their ability, enforcing norms that they consider worthwhile. This includes not only exercising invisible sanctions, such as unfriending (John & Agbarya, 2021; John & Gal, 2018), but also publicly silencing uncivil users (Tsfati & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2018). The pressure to react to incivility in one's personal public sphere—where their intervention (or lack thereof) is publicly visible, and supervision by social ties is relatively high—seems to thwart the bystander effect by strengthening individuals' public self-awareness (van Bommel et al., 2012).

Social relatedness with uncivil users extends the idea of responsibility from discursive to relational concerns (Gagrčin et al., 2022; Gagrčin and Porten-Cheé, forthcoming), grounding the sense of personal responsibility to intervene in the relationship one has with the person rather than in the horizontal nature of civic relations (Dishon & Ben-Porath, 2018). Social relatedness to uncivil users induces a hierarchization of responsibility to enforce norms and shapes the quality of intervention (from sanctioning to reforming). Aiming to sustain the relationship by 'clearing the air' (McLaughlin & Vitak, 2012, p. 311), users seem comparably more likely to engage in some sort of confrontation with close social ties. The relevance of social relatedness is evident also in the perceived appropriateness of intervention—the final step preceding the act of intervention in the bystander intervention model. A close social connection with an uncivil user does not relieve users of the responsibility to intervene publicly but prompts them to insulate the reforming part of intervention from unwanted audiences by moving it to the virtual backstage.

The present study challenges the scholarly fixation on news media comment sections as central spaces for intervention on social media by highlighting personal public spheres as spaces of meaningful social influence. Thus, instead of treating users as social aggregates, it becomes apparent that in the context of mediated social life, user intervention is not an

isolated act of flagging or counterspeaking but a highly contextual matter with real consequences in the lifeworlds of users (Morey et al., 2012; Neubaum, Cargnino, & Maleszka, 2021; Neubaum, Cargnino, Winter, et al., 2021). In this light, the study shifts the focus from bystanders as intervening actors to proprietors of personal public spheres.

Thereupon, I suggest an alternative frame of user responsibility in social media environments. Moe (2020, p. 1) argues that in the light of contemporary information abundance, digital citizenship 'cannot be assessed based on individual citizens in isolation, but should be considered as distributed, and embodied in citizens' social networks, with a division of labor.' Given the amount of disruptive content on social platforms, I show that users rely on heuristics such as a delimited space of responsibility or the involvement of meaningful social ties to determine when and how they are expected to intervene. Thus, building on Moe's concept of ‚distributed readiness citizenship,' individual responsibility for enforcing norms by intervening against incivility can be understood as *distributed among personal public spheres* (cf. Draper, 2019). When responsibility is clearly attributed to the proprietor of a personal public sphere, intervention immediately becomes important to the person in question because instances of incivility create impression and relational management urgencies. Reframing responsibility as distributed in this way takes into account that users negotiate their role in the public discourse 'via the nexus of a private sphere' (Papacharissi, 2010, p. 24), where social and civic responsibilities frequently overlap and are difficult to distinguish (Sinclair, 2012). In this sense, it enables us to consider the relevance of citizens' social ties for enforcing norms in the public discourse online (Moisuc & Brauer, 2019; Sinclair, 2012)—an aspect thus far underresearched but likely to gain prominence as informal political talk online increasingly moves into chat groups.

On a critical note, this study is limited to only one platform, and how users imagine and draw boundaries of their personal public sphere is likely to differ between platforms, contingent upon perceived norms and affordances (Literat & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2021). For example, platform-specific constellations that permit the mutual observability of actors and audiences, such as chat groups, may be more likely to produce a sense of personal responsibility for bystander intervention (e.g., Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022). Moreover, the adopted methodological approach to eliciting norms and expectations was admittedly likely to produce social desirability. Nonetheless, it is remarkable that respondents reasoned against a personal responsibility to intervene, adding nuance to the abstract idea of responsibility, which was arguably the study's intention. Since the type of victim matters for perceptions of

personal responsibility (Naab et al., 2018), it is also relevant to highlight that while I studied incivility directed toward social groups, the characters in the vignettes were explicitly not members of the targeted groups—an aspect that several participants mentioned as a condition for placing the responsibility to act on the proprietor of the personal public sphere.

Although the results support research conducted elsewhere (e.g., Tsfati & Dvir-Gvirsman, 2018), the specificity of the context should be noted, particularly since the value of civil courage rates high in Germany. Future research could address these questions from a comparative perspective (e.g., platforms, countries), empirically test the propositions made in this study in an experimental design (e.g., using the bystander intervention framework and varying the degree of social proximity to the uncivil users), and inquire how different groups (e.g., minorities typically targeted by incivility, illiberal individuals, other age groups) conceive of user responsibility to fight incivility in diverse situational settings. Specifically, given the relevance of social ties for enforcing norms, future research should make use of media sociological perspectives on platform environments and the interaction modes they afford as socially embedded and contextual.

## Conclusion

Amidst growing concerns about incivility on social media and deficient platform moderation practices, democratic discourse on social media platforms depends on ordinary users' sense of personal responsibility to (re)assert norms. This study shows that the boundaries of one's personal public sphere and social relatedness to uncivil users serve as heuristics for thinking about their personal responsibility to intervene against incivility. The presence of relevant social ties and the desire to maintain face compel users to engage in intervening behavior. Counter to the popular focus on news comments as relevant sites for user intervention, users perceive their personal public spheres as comparably more important, efficacious, and appropriate sites for norm enforcement and peer influence. In the absence of personal responsibility for news media comment sections, the results underscore the need for organized comment moderation on news media outlets' Pages. If we are to foster civic intervention against incivility, we ought to employ more person-centric (in addition to discourse-centric) and socially embedded approaches to users‘ roles in online public discourse. Reimagining user responsibility as distributed among personal public spheres is one way of delimiting the space of individual responsibility, making user intervention not

only immediately important but also practically feasible in the context of everyday social media use.

# GENERAL DISCUSSION

## A Social Account of Citizenship Norms

My dissertation project was motivated by the discourse on digital threats to democracy stemming from social media platforms, such as junk content, mis- and disinformation, and incivility, and the need to understand how citizens as users, who are among the main protagonists in this discourse, understand their role therein and envision "good citizenship" on social media platforms. I identified two main shortcomings of previous research into citizenship norms and new media: First, the focus on the use of social media platforms as *tools* for participation, and second, the operationalization of citizenship norms as attitudes toward "good citizenship."

In contrast and building on seminal research on the relevance of political socialization for citizens' ideas about legitimate and desirable political behavior, i.e., "good citizenship", and the related expectations towards their own and other citizens' political behavior (Almond & Verba, 1963; Sigel, 1965), I have proposed that social media platforms have joined mass media as additional instances for learning citizenship norms. The specificity of social media platforms as environments for political socialization, so my proposition, lies in the manifold purposes (e.g., sociability, entertainment, information) and contexts (social, political, technological) which they unite, so that acts of political participation occur as "dispersed practices" with a decisively social, i.e., interpersonal, and interactional character. In turn, the reference point of citizenship norms on social media platforms shifts from institutions (as traditionally examined) to citizens' role in the interactive discourse afforded by social media platforms. In the absence of external instances (such as political institutions) to serve as norm setters, and based on the initial insights (Gagrčin et al., 2022), I argued that norms can emerge as a result of platformized social experiences, whereby users increasingly realize that their online experiences depend upon others' behavior. While initial research offers evidence that for this (Gagrčin et al., 2022), the goal of this dissertation was to illuminate how platformized social experiences in intersecting contexts shape a) citizenship norms and b) ideas about "good citizenship."

To this end, I examined relational aspects of citizenship on social media platforms and the role of specific affordances (visibility and ephemerality) in shaping relational aspects of citizenship. Empirically, and in an attempt to differentiate citizenship norms from ideals of good citizenship and elicit their potential to inform norm compliance, I proposed

conceptualizing citizenship norms as expectations toward political behavior whose defiance entails social disapproval.

My empirical studies suggest the following takeaways:

First, **people understand citizenship norms within their social environment**. My initial claim that social context and interpersonal relations with other citizens matter for people's expectations towards political behavior on social media platforms comparably more than their attitudes to institutions was substantiated by my empirical studies. Studies 1 and 3 show that interpersonal expectations of close social ties as members of imagined audiences matter for people's ideas of responsibility to act. This points to the relevance of social–in addition to or in absence of—political concerns for norm enforcement. Study 2 shows how relevant social groups offer frames for constructing and interpreting (inter)action on social media platforms as good or bad citizenship. Thus, it is through the prism of their social environment that people construed ideals and norms of citizenship on social media platforms.

**Citizenship norms on social media platforms are formed through spatial and relational boundary work.** In my theoretical framework, I have examined the possible role of socially mediated publicness in shaping relational aspects of citizenship, and in turn, shaping political behavior and related expectations. By examining citizenship as a relational practice, I find that defining citizenship norms on social media platforms inevitably entails boundary work—the ways in which people create, maintain, and contest spatial, temporal, and relational boundaries (Wisniewski et al., 2011), differentiating between social categories and identities (Lindell, 2020; Skeggs, 2004). Studies 1 and 3 specifically point to the relevance of spatial boundaries for delimiting space of responsibility. Thus, spatial boundary work refers to claiming one's own "territory" (Wisniewski et al., 2011), and results in expectations that people assert control over it in a way that is visible to their audiences (e.g., "keeping your yard clean" in terms of proper information sharing and enforcing civility norms). Further, all three studies underscore the centrality of relational boundary work for delimiting responsibility to intervene when someone is misinformed (Study 1) or uncivil (Study 3). This finding crucially underlines that close social ties are important instances of norm enforcement (Eriksson, Strimling, et al., 2017; Moisuc & Brauer, 2019), but also among central instances of social influence (Bond et al., 2012). Study 2, on the other hand, shows how boundary work serves as a function of social distinction—people asserted what "good political self-expression" entails by defining, often in a stigmatizing fashion, their civic Other, and acting in a way that showcases one's identity and ideological allegiances.

Taken together, these strategies of spatial and relational boundary work were used to preserve face (and a specific salient identity), maintain relationships with relevant social ties, and regulate expectations towards self and others in terms of political behavior.

**Being a "good citizen" on social media platforms means "doing your part" in and for the public discourse.** My empirical studies substantiate my initial claim about a tension between citizens' autonomy and freedom to use social media to their liking and the realization that their online experiences are influenced by others' behavior. Specifically, I find that part of the maintenance of democratic social order online implies sharing the weight of individual duty by distributing "tasks" among social ties and delimited spaces in platform environments, offering empirical evidence for Moe's (2020) theoretical account of distributed readiness citizenship. On the one hand, everyone ought to "keep their yard clean" of misinformation and incivility (Studies 1 and 3); on the other hand, one ought to engage with peers or otherwise close ties who "took a wrong turn on the Internet" (Studies 1 and 3). The latter was particularly pronounced in the Serbian context, where participants spoke at length about their parents and grandparents being susceptible to state-sponsored propaganda, which caused them feelings of rage, and a sense of responsibility to reform them. The idea is that good citizenship is a collective social effort, and thus that everyone is expected to do their part. Thus, independence and interdependence, as initially proposed, are a false dichotomy—both need to be considered together because "the achievement of genuine human interdependence and individual autonomy in each case requires the other" (Lister 2003, p. 115-16). However, "doing your part" is still quite abstract and does not entail specific action requirements. Here, I believe to have shown that examining citizenship norms as expectations whose defiance entails disapproval can help distinguish them from personal norms, and ideals of good citizenship. This is relevant because these concepts likely have different explanatory power for political behavior.

Overall then, I believe to have shown that a **social account of citizenship norms extends and deepens the institutional approach.** Beyond the established relevance of social interaction and interpersonal relations for citizenship norms on social media platforms, Studies 1 and 2 illustrate that the traditional way of looking at citizens' relation to their national context—actors such as political parties, or generalized political trust, but also socio-political discourses in which online interaction is embedded and responds to—still has its merit. Reversely, my thesis also suggests that characteristics of political and media environments, and specifically, variables such as media and institutional trust, may have

relevant consequences for how people interpret and enact even old-standing ideals such as informed citizenship. Voting, for example, though almost universally considered a matter of duty and a central political act in democracies, involves numerous caveats and boundary conditions (Doherty et al., 2019). In political systems where electoral competitiveness is limited due to semi-authoritarian conditions (Schedler, 2009), many citizens may (rightfully) believe that their vote does not count or choose not to vote for the perceived lack of alternatives (Dragojlo, 2016) or one might consider that one's social group is particularly obliged to vote due to their otherwise marginalized position in society (Oser, 2022). This, in turn, may inform the meaning and norms of political social media practices such as #IVoted-selfies (Butkowski, 2022) and helps understand how traditional activities such as voting are being appropriated and made meaningful in a different context.

Based on these takeaways, in the following, I briefly formulate conceptual and empirical suggestions for the future study of citizenship norms in general, as social expectations toward political behavior contingent upon properties of intersecting contexts in which individuals are embedded.

**Reconciling Universalism and Pluralism in Citizenship Norms and Good Citizenship**

If citizenship norms are contingent upon social, political, and technological aspects of citizens' environment, what are the implications of this dissertation project for studying "good citizenship"?

While it is important to acknowledge the diversity of specific contextual expectations for political behavior, this does not mean that we should embrace relativism in citizenship norms as an alternative to universalism (e.g., as echoed in assertions that norms are becoming pluralized). Here, universalism refers to the principles, practices, and ideals that guide the objectives and functions of political participation (Anttonen & Sipilä, 2014, p. 3). Ideals as "universals" are necessary because they offer emancipatory potential not only for individuals but for society as a whole (Lister, 2003). Without shared ideals, there is no common ground for a social or political order that is worth striving for (Plummer, 2003). However, the "good citizenship" ideal is not a goal in itself – but a normative framework that offers an ideal path toward achieving society's overarching goals. For example, if the goal of *good citizenship* is upholding democracy as a form of government and/or realizing democracy as an organizing principle of social life (Frega, 2019a), then this goal is supposed to guide our actions and behavior, whether they are long-term aspirations or more immediate tasks (Rusbult & Van

Lange, 2008). However, citizenship norms as specific action requirements to achieve these goals must be treated more contextually.

Although it is not possible to completely resolve the tension between universalism and contextual diversity, this does not mean that they are necessarily incompatible. This tension can also be a source of creativity and can lead to a type of universalism that takes into account and values differences (Lister, 2003). This approach is known as "differentiated universalism"—the idea that the realization of universal goals is dependent on considering and respecting differences (Lister, 2003, p. 91). I believe that the approach adopted in this thesis illustrates that differentiated universalism can help evaluate and examine citizens' political behavior relative to the resources they have in their social, political, and technical environments (i.e., communication infrastructures that enable their public connection).

Thinking about citizenship norms as a translation of "good citizenship" into the lifeworld of individuals can help us examine how citizens interpret and enact ideals based on the resources and context of their social, political, and technological environments. Further, this approach offers possibilities to comprehend how certain expectations emerge and the extent to which they are justified and meaningful in the lifeworld of individuals. For example, I have shown that "doing your part" in the context of informed citizenship, entails different citizenship norms in Serbia (expectations that one takes care of oneself and others) and Germany (foremostly expectation that one takes care of one's information behavior). On the one hand, this aids in thinking through social inequalities without stigmatizing citizens as deficient, which was pointed out as problematic by several scholars (Banaji & Cammaerts, 2015; Lindell, 2020; Skeggs, 2004). At the same time, this approach could also help illustrate the extent of pluralistic ignorance—a situation in which people conform to the perceived norms in their social environment, even if those norms are based on false or misguided beliefs (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020).

A relevant dimension of the differentiated universalism approach to studying citizenship on social media platforms is the idea of interdependence. First, users depend on platform infrastructures that steer users' behavior (Bucher & Helmond, 2018; Rusbult & Van Lange, 2008). Second, users are mutually dependent in ensuring that interaction on social media platforms remains democratic and civil. Thus, my thesis supports the claim that in a world of information abundance, fast-paced technological development, and a media-saturated everyday life, how we conceptualize and achieve overarching societal goals must entail a certain division of civic labor in citizens' social networks (Moe, 2020). In turn,

evaluating individuals in terms of good citizenship would also entail their readiness to partake in the division of labor. On the practical level, promoting a division of civic labor and a sense of common purpose means having citizens aid each other in creating or maintaining conditions for participation and for citizens to be prepared to contribute to a common purpose relative to their possibilities and resources.

Studying citizenship norms under the framework of differentiated universalism in this context can entail a) studying how people translate these ideals into social expectations, b) what resources people have in their social environment to participate in the division of labor, and c) how structures and actors discourage/hamper certain divisions of labor.

## Avenues for Future Research of Citizenship Norms

This thesis offers several avenues for further empirical investigation into citizenship norms. Specifically, to fully understand the extent to which communication technologies shape good citizenship and citizenship norms, future research needs to consider both the environmental level (social, political, media) where good citizenship is constructed, as well as how individuals make sense of their experiences with technology on a personal level (Jansson et al., 2021). To date, looking at nuances of citizens' self- and norm understandings has remained reserved for feminist, race, or minority scholars (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010, 2013; Heger et al., 2022). Yet, traditional and mainstream approaches to citizenship could and should be revisited to include relational and contextual aspects of citizenship norms if they are to remain relevant in explaining the possibilities and limits of citizens' role in democracy given the ever-greater differentiation of lifestyles and communication spaces.

### *Diversifying populations we study*

Though my thesis foremostly worked with samples of white social media users in their twenties, several instances suggest the need to diversify the populations we study if we are to develop a more comprehensive understanding of how social contexts shape citizenship norms.

In terms of age, young people are undoubtedly interesting to study as they are considered heralds of novelty. However, other age groups also contribute to shaping discourse and tone on mainstream social media platforms and differ in terms of concrete uses, skills and competencies significantly (Andersen et al., 2020; Hargittai et al., 2019; Hunsaker et al., 2019). Several participants in my empirical studies complained about "older people's"

incompetent use of social media. In fact, the idea of informed citizenship as a collective social effort crucially emerged out of the observation that navigating platformized news use is challenging for cohorts socialized in a different media landscape. Future research can make creative use of this tension but studying norm conflicts, learning, and enforcement from an intergenerational perspective.

With regards to social class, two of my empirical studies documented how citizens construct citizenship norms by drawing boundaries between themselves and their social class and, thus, civic Other. Thus, a social account of citizenship must consider the role of class distinction in citizenship norms (Fast et al., 2021; Skeggs, 2004). Specifically, the middle classes, which have long served as the normal, have been fragmenting in terms of income, ideology, and lifestyles. In other words, the middle classes now have various civic Others to draw boundaries against (Reckwitz, 2020). Studying citizenship norms in different social strata can be explored in terms of different forms of resources (i.e., social, economic, and cultural capital) people have at their disposal to interpret and enact good citizenship (Lindell, 2020; Lindell & Mikkelsen Båge, 2022; Palmer & Toff, 2020). Further, the concept of "felt stigma" – used to examine how generalized Others may perceive and judge us – can be used to understand the negative effects of the intersection between good citizenship ideals, social and interpersonal expectations, and an individual's thoughts and beliefs about being judged by others (Lindell, 2022).

Finally, some of my findings suggest that we should pay closer attention to which aspects of an individual's identity are salient for which norms. This is particularly relevant in groups that are discriminated against based on, for example, race or religion (Brock, 2012; G. H. Miller et al., 2020; Velasquez & Montgomery, 2020). Similar is the case with gender differences in citizenship (Coffé & Bolzendahl, 2010; Eichhorn et al., 2022; Heger et al., 2022). For example, Toff and Palmer (2019) found that people's views of news consumption are often influenced by gender norms—what they call "news-is-for-men" perceptions—, and subject to structural inequalities, which in turn shape everyday news habits.

### *Studying Norm Enforcement*

My thesis illustrates the relevance of studying the enforcement of citizenship norms since citizenship norms as social expectations express not what is desirable but also what people are willing to sanction—which is arguably relevant for upholding democratic social order on social media platforms via informal social control. Though democratic norm

enforcement in the online discourse is widely held to be a noble thing to do (Emmer et al., 2021) it seems difficult to translate into action due to high costs. Treating citizenship norms as interpersonal expectations is a way of situating them in a relevant context and delimiting the scope of their application. This has several implications.

First, where individuals are unwilling to enforce norms due to high costs, formal mechanisms are apt. This is the case for having appointed moderators in news comment sections on social media posts, and some sort of automatic detection of hate speech and mis/disinformation. While the need for moderation is by no means a new insight, my studies offer evidence that citizenship education initiatives might have an important but limited impact on persuading people to intervene against harmful content. As researchers have argued, changing norms (e.g., encouraging online civic intervention as a matter of citizenship norms) may not influence behavior if the contextual factors that sustain that behavior remain (Chung & Rimal, 2016; Legros & Cislaghi, 2020). Instead, citizenship education initiatives related to digital and media literacy could emphasize reflection on spaces of responsibility and foster communication skills necessary for norms enforcement with different social ties. Further, understanding which social norms (or counterreactions to them) inform deviant or otherwise harmful political behaviors would enable more straightforward interventions to alter those norms (Bicchieri, 2017). Finally, while there are more generalizable norms for social media platforms (e.g., Gagrčin et al., 2022), situated norm enforcement is dependent on the affordances of specific platforms. This is relevant, particularly for applied research into norm enforcement such as misinformation correction or intervention against incivility.

### *Studying the Role of Media Coverage for Citizenship Norms*

Some scholars have argued that media coverage of "fake news" has contributed to a moral panic and a hostile atmosphere in society (Bratich, 2020; Carlson, 2020). This can be seen in many of the quotes included in my empirical studies. The bigger point is that media coverage can shape our understanding of the potential, risks, and proper uses of technology (Fisher & Wright, 2006; Lev-On, 2018), as well as how we perceive good and undesirable political behavior (Geber & Hefner, 2019; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). This highlights the importance of considering the source of the normative frames of people we study but also question why we as researchers study certain phenomena and how we approach them.

When it comes to analyzing media as socializing instances for citizenship norms, the concept of moral panics can be fruitful to explore how media coverage of technology, and

related social change, can fuel public anxiety disproportionate to the actual threat (Cohen, 2002; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). While older writings refer to mass media, Ingraham & Reeves (2016) establish how social media platforms enable and foster a rather horizontal, peer-to-peer and social dimension of moral panics, which results, for example, in online public shaming. Thus, it is important to examine which groups and types of behavior are constructed as "folk devils," how this shapes people's perceptions and justifications of appropriate and desirable behavior, and how this, in turn, informs their behavior and willingness to enforce norms.

### *Studying Role Models as Sources of Normative Influence*

During the interviews for this thesis, I asked respondents to provide examples of individuals from the social environment they consider to be "good citizens" and look up to them when they were unable to define the term themselves. This questioning route mostly yielded rich descriptions, both admiring and apologetic sentiments. What this suggests is that we need to revive studying role modeling as an important form of communicating and learning norms (Legros & Cislaghi, 2020).

According to social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1976), exposure to role models in the media can help citizens learn about social norms, including those related to politics. Political role models were previously mostly found in mass media, but they can now be found in people's networks on social media platforms (Ohme & de Vreese, 2020), and can include peers (Geber & Hefner, 2019) but also social media influencers. In fact, given that social media users tend to develop parasocial relationships with influencers (Labrecque, 2014), influencers are likely to be effective in communicating norms (for health and environment, e.g., Breves & Liebers, 2022; de Bérail & Bungener, 2022; Harris et al., 2020). Future research could examine the role of parasocial relationships with politicians, influencers and other actors on social media platforms for communicating and enforcing citizenship norms.

### *The Role of Communication Infrastructures for Citizenship Norms*

While affordances of different social media platforms have been discussed at lenght (Bucher & Helmond, 2018), there is still a lot of potential to explore how affordances shape citizenship norms. Thus, some questions of interest include: How can existing norms be realized and actualized within specific infrastructures? Which citizenship norms are

considered necessary and feasible to establish? Which citizenship norms are more likely to emerge in the presence of which affordances and social factors?

Further, messaging apps like WhatsApp and Telegram are emerging as relevant communication infrastructures. However, the closed or private nature of messenger groups makes users' political behavior, such as informal political talk, cross-cutting exposure, and engagement with news more difficult to study. In the same vein as social media, messenger apps are likely to be used for a broad range of social purposes, so that political talk, if at all, occurs within a broader cultural and social interaction (Matassi et al., 2019) and is likely to be crucially shaped by social factors (Masip et al., 2021). Moreover, messaging apps have different technological affordances compared to news media websites or social media platforms, which are likely to shape how people engage with politics in these environments (Kligler-Vilenchik, 2022; Tenenboim & Kligler-Vilenchik, 2020)and in turn, affect perceptions of appropriate and desirable behavior. For example, Waterloo et al. (2018) find that WhatsApp is perceived as the most appropriate space for positive and negative emotional expression relative to social media platforms. For example, one of the key motivations to use news on messenger apps is the increasing demand for efficiency (Lou et al., 2021), and news is likely to be used decontextualized from media outlets (Masip et al., 2021).

### *Methodological Pluralism in Studying Citizenship Norms*

Finally, one of the main goals of this dissertation was to showcase that citizenship norms could be studied qualitatively in a way that informs quantitative research. Citizenship norms as social and interpersonal expectations can easily be operationalized for experiments and surveys, offering an alternative to existing operationalizations of citizenship norms as attitudes towards good citizenship. For example, surveys can also inquire about respondents' willingness to enforce norms, their perceptions of bad citizenship, and negative perceptions that might explain political behavior. Though not always feasible, I encourage scholars to explore norms using mixed methods approaches. For example, a mixed methods approach could be used to examine how media coverage influences individual perceptions, or to formulate new survey items for inductively conceptualized norms (e.g., Schaetz et al., 2020).

At the same time, citizenship norms research profits from hearing about citizens' self-understanding in their own words. In particular, using vignettes to elicit norms has proven very fruitful in the framework of this dissertation (Study 3). Since norms are activated and enacted in specific situations, short stories, snippets, memes, or videos as props in interviews

make conversation about norms more accessible (Jenkins et al., 2010; Liou & Literat, 2020). Not only does this provide a more realistic account of norms but is also particularly relevant for respondents with limited citizenship vocabularies who struggle to talk about norms and good citizenship from the top of their heads. In addition, and as a way to mitigate the unavoidable social desirability in interviews focused on norms, I found it useful to explicitly ask about *bad* citizenship and the extent to which people were ready to judge or sanction something. For example, I would ask "Would you say that people sharing fake news are *bad citizens*?" Mostly, this made it possible for people to formulate boundary conditions for their judgement and provide a more authentic account of their norms. I hope my approach can motivate future qualitative studies of citizenship norms to conceptualize norms more stringently (for example, using the approach provided in this dissertation). This would allow better integration of findings across methodological approaches and easier triangulation of the findings

**Conclusion**

Media environments are likely to continue changing with the emergence of new communication technologies; with them, the meaning of the "political" and citizens' role are likely to remain central in academic research. At the same time, some social facts are likely to maintain their normative and coercive character, namely the centrality of close interpersonal relations and immediate social environments for how individuals interpret and navigate their role as citizens. Thus, going forward, we should stay mindful of how technologies contribute to reshaping social and interpersonal relations and how this, in turn, influences political behavior. At the same time, Goodman (2022) has pointed out that in the face of democratic threats, citizens are increasingly likely to respond as *partisans*, interpreting citizenship norms through partisan narratives. In turn, this can lead to hostilities and ruptures in interpersonal relations, including the legitimacy of norm negotiation and enforcement among close ties, consequently undermining the stability of democratic systems. As scholars of political communication, it is our responsibility to examine how we can nurture democratically functional interpersonal relations—not least because it is in this space that people are most likely to invest in finding ways to bridge differences.

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I hereby declare that I have completed the submitted dissertation independently and without the use of sources and aids other than those indicated. I have marked as such all statements that are taken literally or in content from other writings. This dissertation has not yet been presented to any other examination authority in the same or a similar form and has not yet been published.

Berlin, 21 December 2022