

‘It is important that you see my personal opinion clearly’

Exploring political micro-influencers’ authenticity labor on Instagram

Carina Kraft

Adelaide University, Australia

✉ carina.kraft@adelaide.edu.au

Abstract

Authenticity is a central concept in social media influencer scholarship and typically associated with influencers’ economic success. For political influencers, perceived authenticity relates to their credibility. However, the ways in which they cultivate and sustain authenticity remain under-researched. This paper examines political influencers’ authenticity labor on Instagram, focusing on practices by nano- and micro-influencers. Employing a case-study on a recent liberalization in German abortion regulations, the analysis draws on in-depth interviews with nine influencers who publicly addressed the issue on their profiles. The findings highlight the centrality of cultivating authenticity in the political realm, revealing influencers’ strategies, tensions, and the integration of political and personal spheres in their political content. Distinctively, political influencers curate ideologically coherent Instagram profiles but face pressures to maintain this coherence. The study adds political influencers’ own perspectives to scholarship on authenticity on social media and discusses implications for how they may shape political online discourse by personalizing debates and emphasizing value-driven engagement.

Keywords: Social media influencers, political influencers, authenticity, micro celebrities, public discourse, social media

1. Introduction

In recent years, social media influencers have increasingly used their platforms to share political and socially relevant content and their potential impact on public political discourse has been acknowledged (Andi, 2021; Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). ‘Political influencing’ (Riedl et al., 2021, p. 2) concerns influencers sharing political posts alongside other content and those who focus exclusively on political issues (Riedl et al., 2023; von Sikorski et al., 2025), often addressing lifestyle political and underrepresented topics (Newman et al., 2024). An example is the German YouTuber Rezo known for entertainment videos, whose 2019 video criticizing the climate policies of the Christian Democratic

Union (CDU) sparked widespread debate and led to public and scholarly speculation about whether it contributed to the CDU's decline in the 2019 European Parliament elections (Allgaier, 2020; Dambeck, 2019; Peter & Muth, 2023).

While political influencing has more recently attracted scholarly attention, research on influencers originally focused on their engagement and economic potential in areas such as fashion, beauty, and gaming (Hudders et al., 2021). Influencers' potential to influence their followers has been linked to several characteristics. Among these, authenticity – appearing true to themselves – is especially important (Banet-Weiser, 2021). Their commercial success has often been associated with their ability to cultivate authenticity (Abidin, 2015; Hund, 2023) and influencers perceived as authentic were more trusted and their brand endorsements were perceived as more credible by their followers (Pöyry et al., 2019; Wellman et al., 2020). In this study, authenticity is understood not as a fixed personal trait but as a contextual and performative practice shaped by platform cultures and presumed audience expectations. Building on scholarship on influencer culture and mediated authenticity (e.g., Arnesson, 2023; Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Banet-Weiser, 2021; Pöyry et al., 2019), authenticity is approached here as a form of authenticity labor (McRae, 2017) through which influencers strategically align personal values, experiences and public self-presentation.

Despite its centrality and its contingent nature, authenticity remains an under-researched concept in the study of political influencing. Broader discussions have acknowledged the performative and strategic aspects of authenticity in political realms (Banet-Weiser, 2021; Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014) and research has examined how authenticity is performed and evaluated in relation to politicians, particularly in digital and social media contexts (e.g., Enli, 2015; Luebke & Engelmann, 2026; Manning et al., 2017). There is emerging empirical evidence that political influencers perceived as more authentic hold higher mobilization potentials (Harff & Schmuck, 2024). However, there is a lack of research that examines the perspectives and experiences of influencers in engaging in political content production – why and how they engage in political content sharing and how they cultivate, negotiate, and sustain authenticity when sharing such content. This gap is particularly pertinent at the micro-influencer level, influencer with smaller follower numbers, where perceived authenticity and credibility are linked to higher follower engagement (Lee et al., 2024).

This paper addresses this gap through interviews with nine political nano- and micro-influencers and draws on a case study of liberalizing an abortion law in Germany, a case that received widespread societal attention. By exploring political influencers' perspectives on their shared posts, the analysis provides nuanced insights into the experiences, considerations, and tensions they navigate when sharing political content and the ways they cultivate authenticity. This study foregrounds their self-perceived authenticity labor and adds nuance to the concept of authenticity labor typically examined from an audience-focused standpoint. A better understanding of political influencers' own perspectives shaping their authenticity labor offers insights into how they navigate their role in shaping political awareness and participation online and sheds light on the evolving nature of political discourse on social media.

2. (Political) social media influencers

Social media influencers are often conceptualized as 'everyday, ordinary Internet users who accumulate a relatively large following' (p.1) through strategic self-presentation and sustained audience engagement (Abidin, 2015). Their fame originates on social media platforms, setting them apart from influential users such as celebrities, politicians and professional athletes (Abidin, 2018; Khamis et al., 2017). Influencers typically engage in lifestyle-oriented areas such as travel, fashion and beauty or gaming and monetize their content (Abidin, 2018; Hudders et al., 2021) and categorizations range from nano- and micro- to mega-influencers depending on follower numbers, with smaller influencers perceived as more relatable (Campbell & Farrell, 2020) and credible (Lee et al., 2024) and thought to have larger persuasive impact and engagement rates (Park et al., 2021).

Influencers' impact has been linked to a variety of characteristics, including their ability to build online communities (Winter et al., 2021), cultivate (para)social relationships (Balaban et al., 2020) and being perceived as credible (Balaban et al., 2020; Riedl et al., 2021), trustworthy (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019) and authentic (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Hudders et al., 2021; Khamis et al., 2017). Their reach is commonly measured by follower numbers, with distinctions ranging from nano- to micro-, macro- and mega-influencers (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019). While larger follower counts indicate higher potential reach (Hudders et al., 2021), smaller influencers tend to generate proportionally higher engagement (Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). They are often regarded as more relatable, credible and authentic than larger influencers, fostering stronger follower relationships and enhancing their persuasive potential (Campbell & Farrell, 2020; Lee et al., 2024; Park et al., 2021).

Increasingly, influencers share political and socially relevant content (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Riedl et al., 2023). Such content ranges from sharing information or personal opinions, encourage participation in petitions, demonstration or other civic activities, to promoting sustainable lifestyles and re-sharing political posts from news outlets or other influential users. Some influencers focus exclusively on political issues while others only occasionally address them and engage in other thematic areas like beauty or gaming (Riedl et al., 2023; von Sikorski et al., 2025). Political influencer content spans the political spectrum and includes both formal issues such as elections, policy debates, or party politics – as exemplified by the German YouTuber Rezo – and lifestyle-oriented issues with political significance (Gonzalez et al., 2023; Suuronen et al., 2022). A focus lies on topics that receive limited mainstream media attention, including climate change, reproductive rights or mental health (Newman et al., 2024). What counts as 'political content' is often blurred and shaped by the socio-cultural context in which it is produced and interpreted (Gonzalez et al., 2023).

Research has linked following political influencers to greater political interest among their audiences (Harff, 2022), increased accessibility of political information (Schmuck et al., 2022) and enhanced political participation both online and offline (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023). Theoretical perspectives on political influencers have drawn on the concept of opinion leadership (Dekoninck & Schmuck, 2023; Harff, 2022; Katz, 1957; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948; Winter et al., 2021), which describes non-professional communicators who gather, process, and (re-)share information, thereby influencing their audiences. Their role as communicators is fostered by the values they represent, their expertise and their position within social networks (Katz, 1957). Other scholars have emphasized the notion of micro-celebrity (Senft, 2008) highlighting influencers' careful self-branding strategies and efforts to maintain an authentic digital identity (Marwick, 2013; Pöyry et al., 2019). Emerging scholarship on political influencers highlighted that perceived authenticity is associated with mobilizing political participation (Harff & Schmuck, 2024). Taken together, these notions alongside foregrounded characteristics of influencers earlier in this section warrant a closer examination of authenticity as an overarching concept and strategic practice to cultivating economic and, presumably, political impact.

3. Authenticity and (political) micro-influencers

With the rise of social media, cultivating authenticity has become a strategic tool for brands, influencers as well as politicians to direct audience attention online (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014; Hund, 2023). Authenticity in social media influencer scholarship is typically broken down into facets such as perceived sincerity, genuineness and credibility (Pöyry et al., 2019) and associated with presenting uniqueness, realness, transparency, originality and truthfulness (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Schwarz & Williams, 2020). However, there are no objective criteria to assess whether someone is authentic or not. Authenticity is highly contextual, culturally dependent and socially constructed, it 'functions in particular ways for particular individuals and groups in particular circumstances' (Schwarz & Williams, 2020, p. 7). In this sense, authenticity is negotiated, manufactured and perceived between a source, the influencer, and their audience, the followers but never fully attained (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Khamis et al., 2017).

For influencers on social media, cultivating authenticity has been denoted a ‘messy concept’ (Banet-Weiser, 2021, p. 142). They are navigating an ever-changing line between being true to themselves and relatable to others to cultivate authenticity. They present their content in ways regarded as sincere, coherent and legitimate by followers (Arnesson, 2023; Banet-Weiser, 2021; McRae, 2017). They avoid being perceived as ‘fake’ or sharing ‘staged’ content that does not align with followers’ perceptions of influencers’ core values and, in contrast to celebrities, often skillfully share personal information (McRae, 2017). Additionally, influencers respond to shifting platform trends and functions (Leaver et al., 2020) and balance their self-presentation with monetizing content and engaging in collaborations that are ‘on brand’ (Pöyry et al., 2019; Wellman et al., 2020). Hence, authenticity is approached as a relational and performative practice influenced by platform logics and the expectations of audiences, not a fixed personal trait. Strategically navigating these demands and tensions that might arise lies at the core of what scholars have termed authenticity labor (McRae, 2017). The following section introduces theoretical and empirical perspectives on authenticity labor, with particular attention to its relevance to political influencers.

3.1 Theoretical and empirical notions on authenticity labor of political influencers

Authenticity labor can be understood as an ongoing and often ambiguous effort of influencers to perform and sustain an ‘authentic’ online persona (McRae, 2017). Studying audience responses to lifestyle bloggers, McRae (2017) observed how these bloggers manufactured an authentic presence by cultivating, what the author called, personal authenticity, ethical authenticity and extra/ordinariness – appearing true to themselves, staying consistent with their values, and balancing relatability with aspiration. These aspects highlight the multifaceted and sometimes paradoxical nature of authenticity labor and are reminiscent of how influencer practices have been conceptualized and examined so far.

The conceptualization of influencers as micro-celebrities, whose self-branding strategies involve shaping a consistent, recognizable online presence their audiences can engage with, can be seen as a form of authenticity labor. Self-branding relies on using recognizable aesthetics, recurring themes or specific niche content in areas like travel, fashion, gaming or, in this case, politically relevant content (Marwick, 2013; Senft, 2013). Responsive to this demand, an analysis of Twitter/X user re-tweets revealed that more active users, those who have large follower numbers and regularly (re-)share content, tend to engage in one or a few topic areas. This topical consistency was discussed to relate to increased familiarity (Shi et al., 2023). Other empirical evidence supports the notion of using recognizable aesthetics. Followers evaluated photos of celebrities and influencers with findings showing that photo aesthetics perceived as congruent to their respective profiles contributed to attributed genuineness and credibility of a post (Pöyry et al., 2019). A case study of influencers’ profiles across different platforms emphasized how the use of ‘immediately recognizable visual aesthetics’ (p. 344) contributes to their perceived authenticity (Marwick, 2015) and Wellman et al. (2020) highlighted how influencers weighed collaborations against how well they fit into their overall online presence. Congruence of content can be easily assessed online with social media’s technical features enabling an evaluation against past content, heightening the imperative for consistency (Leaver et al., 2020).

At the same time, micro-celebrities’ authenticity is evaluated based on spontaneity (Marwick, 2013). Influencers sharing spontaneous content using Instagram Stories enhances feelings of closeness among followers (Arnesson, 2023; Leaver et al., 2020). Sharing seemingly spontaneous content also relates to perceived transparency (Schwarz & Williams, 2020). A content-analysis of conservative, reactionary political influencers’ micro-celebrity practices on YouTube highlighted how they presented themselves as relatable, responsive and transparent, sharing seemingly spontaneous, and “backstage” or behind-the-scenes processes’ (p. 213), thereby cultivating credibility and authenticity (Lewis, 2020, p. 213). These tensions between offering congruent, recognizable online content, yet sharing seemingly spontaneous

posts and stories that offer insights into influencers' 'real' life has also been identified by Balaban and Szambolics (2022) who offered an exploration of lifestyle influencers' self-perceived authenticity.

Allowing 'behind-the-scenes' glimpses to an audience is a way influencers convey 'realness,' a practice that has been conceptualized through Goffman's dramaturgical theory as performative (Kivisto & Pittman, 2013) and often been associated with performed authenticity (Schwarz & Williams, 2020). Abidin (2015) described this as 'disclosive intimacies,' where lifestyle influencers carefully curate private information to give 'followers the impression that they are privy to the private, usually inaccessible aspects of influencers' lives' (Abidin, 2015, p. 8). Disclosive intimacies as an authenticity labor practice has been found to rely on influencers' transparency, disclosure of personal experiences and presenting themselves as emotionally vulnerable to their audiences (Arnesson, 2023; Marwick, 2015). More broadly, this aligns with research on self-disclosure in social media, which shows that selective sharing can foster trust, strengthen parasocial relationships and enhance identification with a community (Chen & Sharma, 2013). However, 'realness' on social media is always limited and shared content is labored and edited to align with prevailing vernaculars, the trends, styles and aesthetics that dominate on social media platforms (Leaver et al., 2020). In this sense, disclosive intimacies exemplify how influencers mobilize both performative self-presentation and selective self-disclosure as part of their authenticity labor.

Overall, scholarship on authenticity labor in social media influencing remains fragmented, with different approaches emphasizing certain aspects of it. Audience-centered research and content analyses have provided valuable insights into practices perceived as coherent, 'real' and credible (e.g., Pöyry et al., 2019), complemented by Balaban and Szambolics (2022) who offered a rare account of lifestyle influencers' self-perception and considerations around manufacturing authenticity. Yet, the experiences and perspectives of political influencers when sharing political content remained sidelined in previous research. The ways in which political influencers engage in self-branding strategies are unclear, as are their perspectives on how they balance political and more personal content and engage with particular political debates. This is further complicated by including influencers who sometimes as well as those who exclusively share political content in dominant definitions as their strategies might differ. This gap is especially relevant for micro-influencers, for whom perceived authenticity and credibility are more closely tied to follower engagement than for larger influencers (Lee et al., 2024).

This paper addresses this gap by asking: *How and why do political micro-influencers engage in political content sharing? How does this relate to how authenticity is cultivated, negotiated, and sustained?* Drawing on a case study and interviews with political micro-influencers including their reflections on posts they shared, the analysis explores their own perspectives on performed authenticity labor, as detailed next.

4. Case study and context

This research engages with political micro-influencers' perspectives on political content they shared in relation to the repeal of section §219a of the Criminal Code (short: §219a) by the German parliament on June 24th, 2022. §219a prohibited medical professionals from 'advertising' abortions, including publicly informing whether abortions were offered, the methods used and the associated risks (The Federal Government, 2022). The repeal marked a liberalization of abortion laws by enhancing information accessibility of abortions, sparking wider societal attention and contestation across political standpoints. The case has significance beyond Germany. Abortion rights are closely connected to wider struggles over reproductive justice (Baird & Millar, 2020), and the repeal occurred against the backdrop of restrictive changes in the US and Poland, as well as a continuing movement in Germany to remove abortion entirely from the Criminal Code through repealing §218 (Lau, 2022).

Abortion rights and reproductive equality have been central issues for feminist movements (Baird & Millar, 2020). Addressing these topics and advocating for changes in abortion regulations on social media aligns with the current trend of popular feminism predominantly enacted online (Banet-Weiser, 2021;

Mendes et al., 2019). For feminists and feminist activists, social media platforms serve as tools for networking, raising awareness, educating others, and challenging dominant belief systems (Mendes et al., 2019). A key concept in feminist scholarship is ‘the personal is political’ (Hanisch, 1969), which involves sharing personal narratives to make political debates more intelligible. Commonly used by feminist activists, this practice brings politically relevant issues traditionally considered private and taboo, such as abortions or sexual harassment, into the public sphere. It politicizes and capitalizes on shared experiential accounts and calls for political change (Phipps, 2016). A prominent example is the #metoo movement, where women publicly disclosed their personal experiences of sexual harassment (Mendes et al., 2019). This practice of personal disclosure resonates with influencer strategies such as ‘disclosive intimacies’ (Abidin, 2015) and adds a political dimension to influencers’ authenticity labor. Curated self-disclosure can thus function as a strategic tool to frame political issues and mobilize participation, highlighting the relevance of examining authenticity in political influencing. At the same time, the distinction between feminist activists and political influencers has been challenged as overly simplistic. Scharff (2023), for example, argues that such distinctions risk trivializing political influencing while overlooking how commercial and platform logics increasingly shape feminist activism as well. Rather than representing clearly separate categories, activism and influencing can therefore overlap in practices such as self-disclosure, issue advocacy, and negotiating the platformization of content. This overlap was also reflected in the interviews, where participants described navigating tensions between personal values, monetization, and algorithmic logics online. Building on this perspective, feminist activist research offers a useful lens for understanding political influencers’ engagement with lifestyle-related or historically underrepresented political issues.

As outlined next, the case study facilitated the identification of relevant political content and potential interviewees and provided a contextual framework for exploring their perspectives on cultivating and sustaining authenticity labor.

5. Method

5.1 Sample

The analysis is grounded in semi-structured interviews with nine political micro-influencers on Instagram, exploring their perspectives on their authenticity labor when sharing political content in the case of liberalizing abortion regulations in Germany. Interviews were conducted via Zoom between February and July 2023 and lasted between 34 and 72 minutes. The sample consisted of six women and three men, aged between 30 and 55. All interviewees had public Instagram accounts at the time of the interviews. For *tommy_schwarwel*, *ami_you* and *i03* political content covering various issues was their main topic of engagement while the other interviewees brought up political issues more or less regularly. Generally, interviewees focused their engagement within one or two main content areas. All interviewees supported the repeal of §219a. Those in the original selection of influencers who did not support the repeal either did not see the invitation to be part of the study, ignored it or declined an interview. Table 1 contains further information on participants.

5.2 Procedure

Interviewees were identified employing a hashtag search on Instagram (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022; Laestadius & Witt, 2022). Instagram was the chosen medium for this study as it is the most widely used social media platform in Germany (Newman et al., 2022), its associations with influencer culture and a shift toward user-generated political content (Leaver et al., 2020; Riedl et al., 2021). Moreover, Instagram offered affordances such as persistence, visibility and searchability that allowed for the identification of relevant content (Laestadius & Witt, 2022; Leaver et al., 2020).

Searched hashtags included #219a, #paragraf219a [paragraph 219a] and #schwangerschaftsabbruch [abortion] and the search was expanded according to co-occurring hashtags (Jaramillo-Dent et al., 2022). This initial search yielded 1,866 posts, which were manually screened to identify influencers. Selection criteria included public accounts belonging to genuine persons whose popularity originated online, with a minimum of 1,000 followers, qualifying them as nano- or micro-influencers (Abidin, 2015; Goanta & Ranchordás, 2020). Hence, influencer status of potential participants was analytically assigned based on follower count, presumed origin of fame and observable content practices in line with previous research outlined above. Accounts belonging to politicians, companies, political parties, and NGOs were excluded. In total, 68 influencer accounts satisfied the criteria, of which 66 could be contacted and were invited via direct messages on Instagram (two could not be messaged). Nine participants agreed to be interviewed and provided written consent to audio-recordings and, except one, to the use of their screenshots in interviews and reproduction for academic publications.

The semi-structured interview guide covered the following topics: participants' activities on Instagram and other platforms, their understanding of §219a, political interest and participation both online and offline, experiences with platform algorithms and the commercialization of content. The interviews formed part of a larger research project and aspects of authenticity labor discussed here were occurring naturally in the conversations and their significance emerged through data analysis.

In addition, the guide included a collaborative analysis of their posts related to the repeal of §219a, using a trace-interviewing approach (Dubois & Ford, 2015). Visualizations of influencers' posts that were identified during the hashtag search were screenshared and interviewees invited to reflect on their own post(s): 'Could you tell me how and why you created and shared this post?' Follow-up probing questions such as 'What was your goal by sharing this post?' or 'What was your perception on how followers responded?' encouraged deeper reflection. The interviewer also shared observations about the posts, 'I noticed a few things in particular...' prompting participants to elaborate, provide context, or contest these interpretations. For instance, interviewees rarely discussed the timing of their posts, yet when asked about it they elaborated on their (non-)strategic intentions behind it. In one instance, an interviewee, heyveganjude, preselected multiple posts she shared covering reproductive rights that were collaboratively analyzed. At the end of the interviews, participants' consent was reiterated and they were offered a gift card for their participation.

Table 1. Participant information political micro-influencers at the time of the interview

#	Username/ Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Number of followers ¹	Main area of activity	Multiple posts on §219a	Number of Likes ²	Number of comments ²
1	tommy_schwarwel	54	m	12.000	Political caricatures	X	851	35
2	ami_you	33	w	2.080	feminism, party politics lifestyle		29	0
3	influencer03 (i03)	36	m	1.262	Medical Professional, Feminism, Climate change		45	1
4	heyveganjude	35	w	3.423	Feminism, veganism	X	295	26
5	lucielangston	38	w	2.572	Illustrator, lifestyle	X	85	4
6	justinepust	30	w	11.400	Author, feminism, community Sundays	X	1.126	87

7	ichdenkeja	32	m	5.948	Streetart, everyday and political thoughts	143	4
8	bettinaschipping	55	w	7.774	Everyday and political cartoons	441	19
9	kathrin.knoepfle	34	w	1.888	Performance art	131	5

¹ Number of followers at the time of the interviews; rounded to the nearest hundred if >10.000.

² Number of likes and comments are reported for the collaboratively analyzed post.

5.3 Data analysis

Interviews were recorded using the built-in audio-recorder in Zoom and transcribed using sonix.ai (Sonix, 2023). Data analysis software MAXQDA (VERBI Software, 2023) facilitated the analysis. Given the context of the research and the native language of the author, interviews were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed in German. Direct quotations and social media posts were translated by the author (German native).

The transcripts were coded adopting an inductive reflexive thematic analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2022). Analysis followed Braun and Clarke’s six steps, with codes and themes iteratively revised to identify patterned meanings in context. Initial codes captured interviewees’ experiences and perspectives, for example, their framing of §219a (e.g., feminist, personal, liberal) and their interpretations of their posts (e.g., informing about legislation, expressing opinions or values, conveying emotions, or drawing attention to the topic). These codes were refined and developed into broader themes, for example, ‘politicizing their personal experiences.’ Existing scholarship on authenticity practices served as sensitizing concepts (Blumer, 1954; Patton, 2002), guiding interpretation of influencer perspectives rather than defining the study design or coding process. Themes emerged from the material itself, with influencers’ practices as authenticity labor becoming especially salient through participants’ accounts.

The screenshots of political influencers’ posts included here serve as illustrations of interviewees’ own considerations and reflections, with consent for reproduction obtained. The posts were not analyzed separately using visual methodologies, as the focus lied on how influencers themselves created meaning and impact through them.

5.4 Ethical considerations

This research is informed by considerations for ethical internet research by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) (franzke et al., 2020; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Although a public profile with at least 1,000 followers was a selection criterion, based on this alone, it was unclear whether interviewees regarded themselves as public or private individuals and whether they wished to be recognized for their contributions. In line with AoIR recommendations, participants could decide whether they preferred to be cited under a pseudonym or with their Instagram username. They were also asked for explicit consent to screen-capture and reproduce their profiles and posts, with this consent reiterated during the interviews to give them the opportunity to reconsider. They were also given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts, which one participant chose to do. Eight participants agreed to the use of their usernames and posts, one decided to keep contributions confidential.

Moreover, participants were informed in advance about the case study and its potentially sensitive nature. They were provided with information on appropriate support services. The risk of misuse or instrumentalization of the findings, including the reproduction of influencers’ posts, was assessed as low given that participants had already shared this content publicly during a period of heightened debate using hashtags that facilitated finding their posts. While some interviewees reported experiences with hate speech, they still wished to be recognized for their posts and reinforced their support for liberalizations of abortion regulations. This research was approved by the author’s home university.

6. Findings

6.1 Centrality of authenticity when politically engaging online

The significance of authenticity for political micro-influencers emerged as a central finding in this analysis. Across interviews, political micro-influencers emphasized their political engagement online is grounded in their personal interest in and care about political matters addressed. To underscore this, interviewees repeatedly referred to their own political orientation and identity, their feelings in response to certain political matters and how they might be personally affected by political debates they engaged in. Some interviewees focused their political engagement on areas such as feminism, women rights and climate change (ami_you, heyveganjude, i03, justinepust) while others covered everyday political news and various political topics on their accounts (see Table 1). Still, they emphasized the importance that a political topic resonated with their political interests and perspectives (tommy_schwarwel, ichdenkeja, bettinasschipping).

With regard to the case study, abortion regulations and reproductive autonomy were key topics for ami_you, heyveganjude and i03 who identified themselves as feminists. As ami_you put it, ‘the topic of abortions is a perennial issue for feminists’ and it is of high importance ‘for the feminist agenda’, resonating with feminist scholarship (Baird & Millar, 2020). tommy_schwarwel has been invested in abortion rights for a long time and the value of freedom of choice has been something he never questioned, ‘I have been following the whole debate since I was a toddler [...] and I just grew up like that, “My Body, My Choice”.’ Publicly engaging in the repeal of §219a was of great personal importance for those interviewees who had experienced an abortion or were otherwise affected by reproductive inequality. Grounded in their experiences, justinepust and kathrin.knoepfle elaborated on the significance for them to support the repeal online as they primarily found resources from groups condemning abortions rather than reliable medical information. kathrin.knoepfle added, ‘for me there was somehow so very little to find where I could say “Ah, I can connect with that”.’ They highlighted how the legislation of §219a affected their lived experiences while drawing attention to how social media can function as a medium to find relatable accounts and sources (Leaver et al., 2020). heyveganjude underwent a sterilization and addressed this on her profile, linking her experience to the ideas of bodily autonomy and reproductive equality when addressing §219a, adopting a feminist framing for her engagement online (Baird & Millar, 2020).

Analysis showed how political micro-influencers’ personal interest in political issues built the foundation for their online engagement and their motives of addressing political issues. Interviews revealed how political micro-influencers wanted to be perceived as public allies to certain groups (heyveganjude, lucielangston), and first and foremost aimed to raise awareness for issues such as violence against women, queer, and trans rights (heyveganjude, justinepust), to break taboos, particularly in the context of abortion regulations (tommy_schwarwel, heyveganjude, kathrin.knoepfle), educate others (ami_you, i03, heyveganjude, lucielangston) and to mobilize their followers by advertising local demonstrations or sharing online petitions (ami_you, justinepust, i03).

Interpreted through the lens of authenticity labor, interviewees’ emphasis on engaging with political issues that aligned with their personal interests and lived experiences can be understood as the foundation of their authenticity work. This resonates with McRae’s (2017) notion of ‘personal authenticity’ – the effort to appear true to oneself. Following this notion, political micro-influencers are required to engage in strategic authenticity labor to convey and frame their engagement as reflecting their personal interests. The remainder of the analysis will explore the ways influencers cultivate their engagement and interpret their practices using established theories and approaches from influencer scholarship and feminist activism.

6.1.1 The personal is political: Politicizing experiential accounts of reproductive rights

heyveganjude and justinepust politicized their personal experiences and shared their personal narratives on reproductive rights linking it to the political debate on §219a. heyveganjude and justinepust publicly shared their experiences of having had a sterilization and abortion, respectively. Figure 1, left side, shows a post heyveganjude shared ahead of a vote in parliament on §219a. It is a picture of her after her sterilization procedure in a hospital robe, including a caption where heyveganjude argued for reproductive rights and bodily autonomy drawing on her own experience.

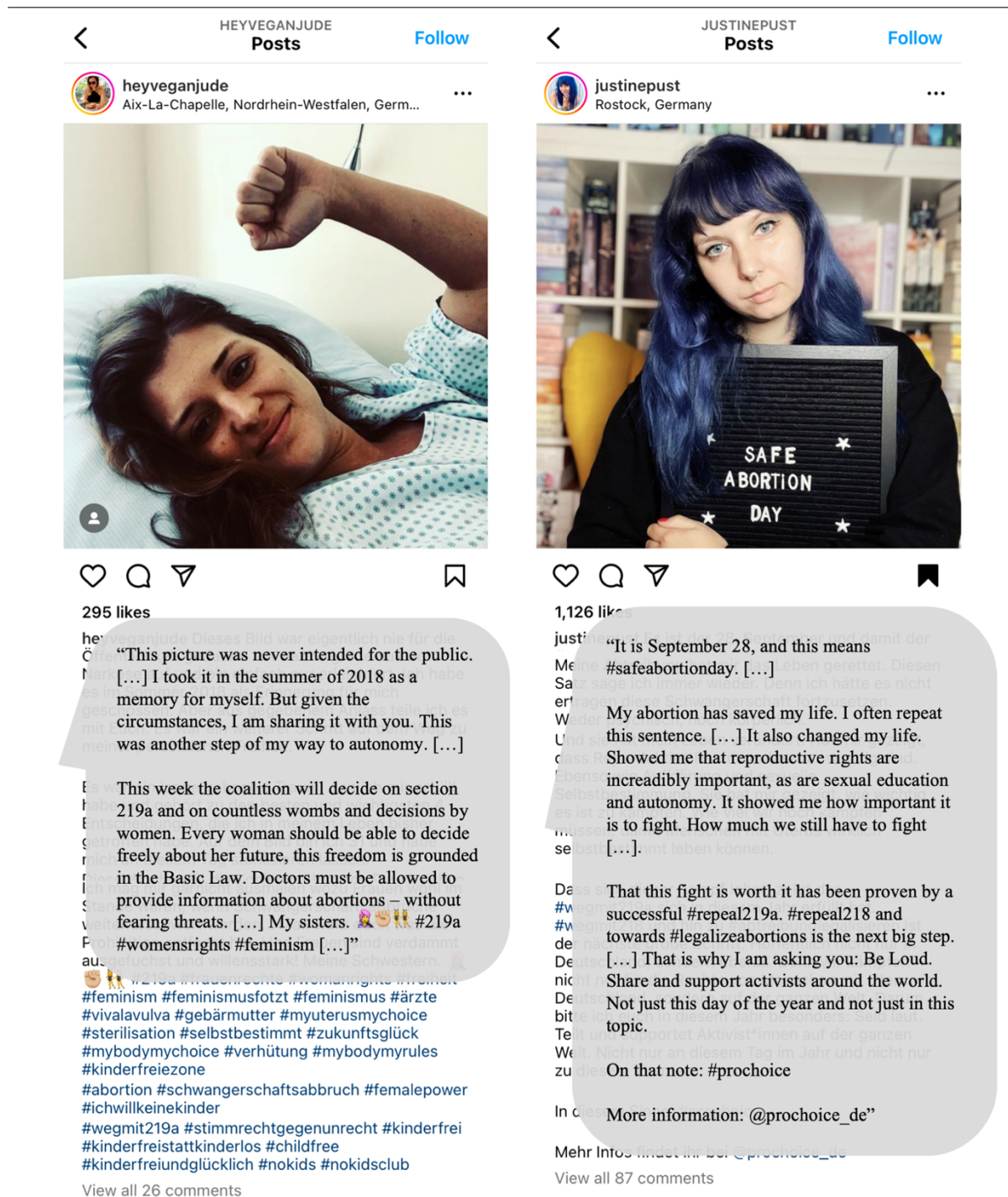


Figure 1. heyveganjude and justinepust politicized their experiential accounts of reproductive rights

Similarly, justinepust shared her experience of having had an abortion and adding that ‘my abortion has saved my life’. She then argued for a change in abortion regulations and tagged the Instagram Account of ProChoice, an NGO working towards reproductive equality, for more information. justinepust elaborated in the interview on her post and added ‘the moment I tell my story, it (the political issue in question) is somehow accessible to everyone’, aiming to initiate reflection in their followers and, in the case of justinepust, directing them to more information on reproductive rights. Politicizing their experiences, particularly experiences regarding reproductive rights, ties into the long-standing feminist phrase ‘the personal is political’ (Hanisch, 1969). Sharing personal stories has long been a feminist strategy to highlight social inequalities. From a contemporary feminist perspective, heyveganjude and justinepust’s posts can be interpreted as strategically cultivating political impact through accumulating experiential capital (Phipps, 2016).

From a social media scholarship perspective, heyveganjude and justinepust’s feminist practices resonate with strategic authenticity work. Opening up about their personal experiences and showing themselves vulnerable, can be seen as cultivating disclosive intimacies with their respective audiences (Abidin, 2015; Marwick, 2015). In support, heyveganjude opened the caption of her post stating that the picture is very personal, ‘never intended for the public’; a sentiment she reinforced in the interview: ‘I took this picture of myself after my sterilization - it’s a selfie I simply took for myself, and I never intended to share it.’ In sharing this picture, she quite literally allowed her followers a ‘backstage’ view into her life (Kivisto & Pittman, 2013). justinepust recalled how disclosing her abortion resonated with her followers, some of whom subsequently reached out to her and shared their own experiences with abortions. This can be interpreted as creating a space for other users to relate, fostering feelings of connectedness and strengthening (para-)social bonds with her followers, both aspects related to authenticity (Abidin, 2015; Arnesson, 2023). Moreover, drawing on communication theories such as source credibility (Hovland et al., 1953) more broadly, influencer practices of disclosing personal experiences can enhance their perceived credibility and trustworthiness with followers.

6.1.2 *The political is personal: Normatively leading with a political opinion*

Abortions are considered sensitive and private matters and, generally, people avoid talking about them. The public discourse on safe abortions and reproductive equality has been dominated by feminists and facilitated by feminist abortion scholarship (Baird & Millar, 2020). In the present study, political micro-influencers publicly addressed this topic and emphasized how they led with their perspective in the debate on §219a. This is interpreted as cultivating authenticity by breaking taboos, presenting their feminist and democratic values and offering insights into their political beliefs that are usually kept private.

ami_you (Figure 2, left) shared a photograph of a self-made demonstration poster that sat in her kitchen window, articulating her perspective in the debate on abortion rights. She emphasized: ‘I think it’s really important for the feminist fight and in the feminist context that we pay attention to this issue [...] it was important to me to comment on this again in some way.’ For lucielangston, creating illustrations is ‘highly political’ and she elaborated how she started ‘expressing myself politically in illustration’ as exemplified in the commissioned graphic novel showcasing the history of abortion regulations in Germany in the lead up to Safe Abortion Day, with the first page showing the feminist approach taken in the artwork (Figure 2, right). For i03 whose post very explicitly conveyed their opinion, ‘it is important [...] that you see my personal opinion clearly and [...] that people are then called up to take a stand’.

These accounts showed how political micro-influencers inserted themselves into the debate on reproductive rights by voicing their opinions. Moreover, educating followers on current abortion legislation was framed as a way to initiate opinion formation processes. In another post on the topic, lucielangston explained: ‘The idea was to highlight countries that are further along or, in our opinion, better positioned than Germany (in legalizing abortions) and to use them as sources of inspiration by showing their approaches to abortion regulations.’

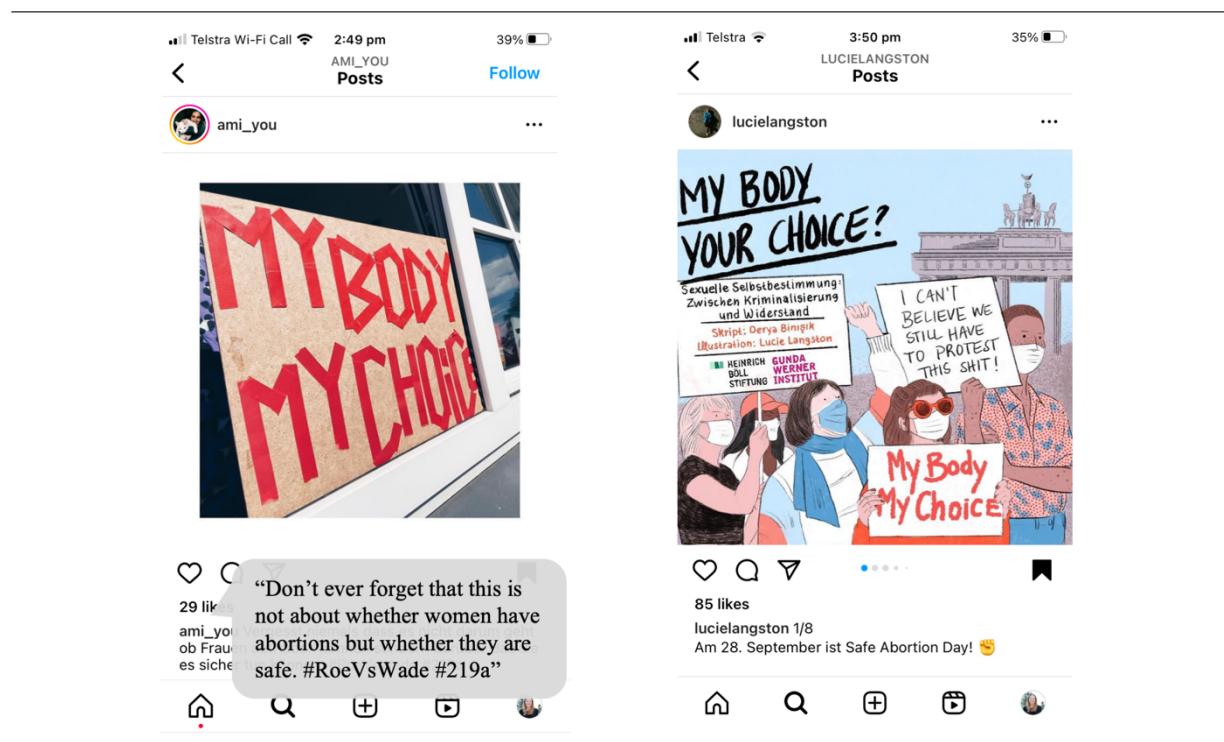


Figure 2. ami_you and lucielangston explicitly supporting the repeal of §219a

By vocalizing and openly calling for safe abortions, political micro-influencers broke the taboo of talking about abortions, as exemplified by kathrin.knoepfle saying, ‘it was also important to me to be a little more, perhaps just a voice [...] as it is a taboo subject’ and aligned themselves with the feminist discourse and exposed their political values and beliefs. Their practices can be also interpreted as normatively trying to shape their followers’ opinions by showing their own viewpoint and educating them on the issue (Mutz, 1998). Thus, the interviewees navigated authenticity by ‘reversing’ the feminist idea discussed in the previous section – the political is personal. They publicly showed their opinions which is seen as committing to a set of values, a way to cultivating authenticity (Balaban & Szabolics, 2022) and political participation (Mutz, 1998). Insights into influencers’ personal thoughts and opinions are associated to followers’ perceptions of relatedness and connectedness over (shared) values (Abidin, 2015; Kivisto & Pittman, 2013).

6.2 Curating ideologically coherent profiles and self-branding efforts

The analysis showed how interviewees responded to a broader demand for authenticity on social media, one that extends beyond individual posts (Marwick, 2015; Pöyry et al., 2019) and involves strategically framing political messages (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014). They developed political online identities by balancing political, private, professional, and commercial content. In reflecting on their political posts, interviewees consistently situated them within the coherence of their overall profiles, shifting the analytical focus toward what has typically been conceptualized as influencers’ self-branding strategies (Balaban & Szabolics, 2022; Marwick, 2015; McRae, 2017).

6.2.1 Topical and ideological coherence

Political micro-influencers framed their political engagement such as in the case of §219a by clearly positioning themselves, their main area of interest and their political viewpoints on Instagram. Figure 3

exemplifies how heyveganjude utilized the bio feature. She reflected on the importance of using the bio feature to display her areas of engagement and political viewpoints:

The main reason why I got a public account, a blogger account, because then you can enter a lot more in the bio at the top [...] and I try to use my bio for as much information as possible; [...] For a while, I put 'please no inquiries' in my bio, but I wanted to make better use of the space now.

Similar considerations were shared by kathrin.knoepfle and i03 in the interviews who included political viewpoints and their main areas of engagement in their bio. The practice of summarizing the content area influencers primarily share on their profiles has been seen as emphasizing the uniqueness of their profiles (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022). In the present case, this unique presentation extends to influencers' political opinions and ideological orientations.

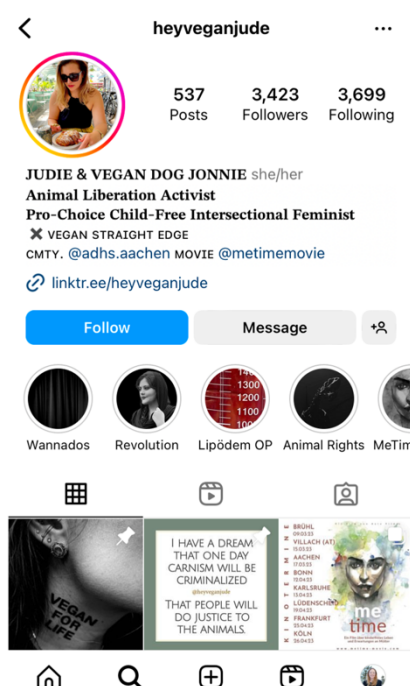


Figure 3. heyveganjude voicing her political perspectives utilizing the bio feature

Within these thematic frames, political micro-influencers repeatedly emphasized their ideological orientations, reflected in the area(s) and topics they were engaging in and the political perspectives and beliefs they presented through their content. heyveganjude emphasized her support of the case study by pointing toward several posts concerning the topic in the interview (Figure 4). She participated in a documentary, metime, which explores reproductive rights and shared art incorporating vulvas, typically interpreted as a feminist practice of empowerment (Lloyd, 2023). Similarly, justinepust highlighted how she addressed reproductive rights in her novels and shared annual posts on Safe Abortion Day. lucielangston detailed how she proactively sought out commissioned projects that present feminist perspectives:

There's an Instagram account [...] with illustrations of historical feminist figures who were involved with abortions in some way. I followed it and looked for opportunities to illustrate, like, "Hi, I'm Lucie, I really like your account. I'd like to illustrate something. Here's my Instagram account." And back then, it wasn't important to me whether I earned money. [...] I wanted to have a chance, but only with a topic I'm interested in. Then they immediately said, "Yeah, we don't have anyone for Safe Abortion Day this year."

Interviewees' efforts to construct and sustain an ideologically coherent profile has been found as a distinct practice of political micro-influencers within the self-branding framework (Marwick, 2015) while also reflecting broader notions of authenticity as performative on social media (Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014). Moreover, interpreting influencers' pursuits of maintaining a coherent and ideologically consistent profile through source credibility theory (Hovland et al., 1953) sheds light on how consistency not only relates to feelings of familiarity and adding to the distinctiveness of influencers, but also to perceptions of their reliability and expertise.

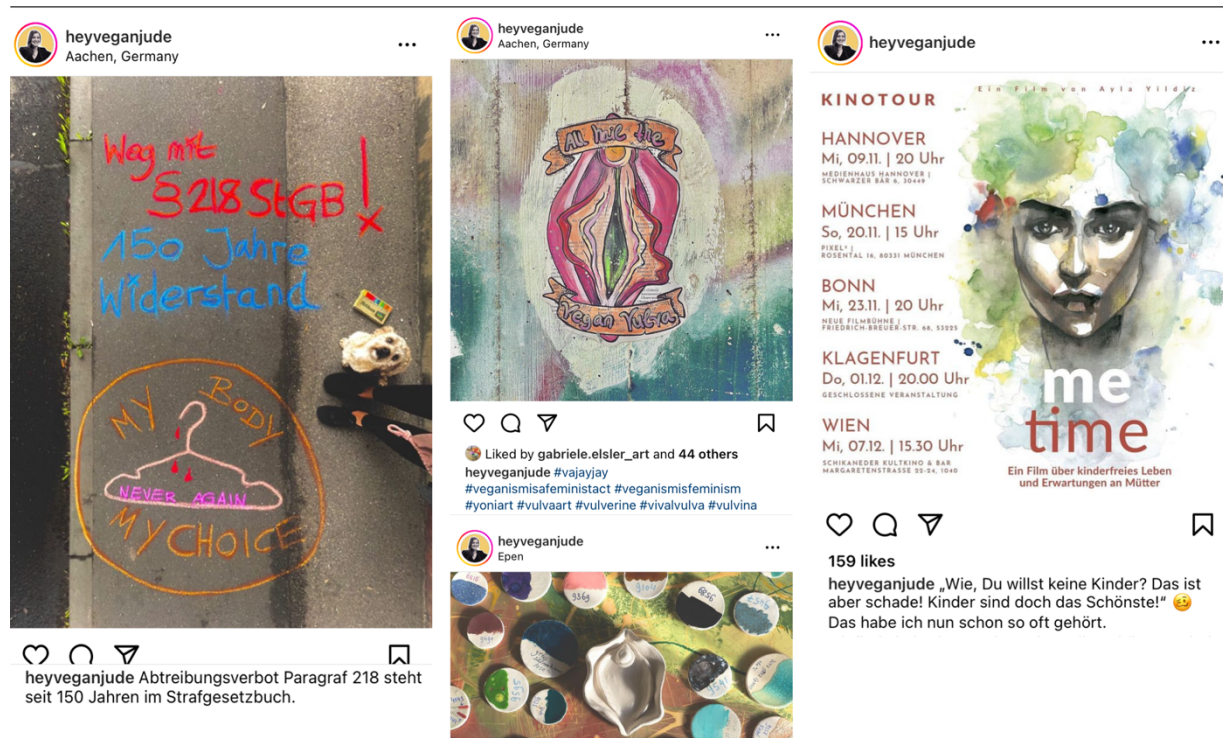


Figure 4. A selection of @heyveganjude's Instagram posts addressing reproductive rights

6.2.2 Commitment to personal values

Political micro-influencers continued to cultivate ideological coherence and authenticity by consciously aligning both their moderation practices and their collaborations with personal democratic values. While online discussions are one of the most contested issues among interviewees – some sought discussions, others avoided discussions – all participants were vigilant about discussions arising on their profiles and took on the responsibility for moderating those. For instance, tommy_schwarwel elaborated on a system using yellow and red colored emojis with public explanations to indicate non-tolerable comments. Following considerations of free speech, tommy_schwarwel would only report or block accounts if a person would consistently face ‘red cards’, sharing anti-democratic, extremist or racist statements.

Interviewees commitment to their values extended to their collaborative practices. They stressed the importance of disclosing commissions and aligning paid or artistic work with their political identities (e.g., quote by luciolangston earlier). By moderating interactions, maintaining transparency, and staying true to their values, interviewees engaged in practices that, when viewed through an ‘ethics of authenticity’, can be understood as cultivating credibility and authenticity online (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022; Wellman et al., 2020).

6.2.3 Showing 'realness'

Drawing on lifestyle influencers' practices, cultivating authenticity required self-branding efforts to use recognizable, Instagram-able aesthetics as well as the frequency and types of content shared (Marwick, 2013). Recognizable aesthetics, as seen on the profiles of *tommy_schwarwel* and *ichdenkeja* (Figure 5), were a common strategy political micro-influencer subscribed to as well:

The idea behind my posts is to always have a short text or saying on each slide; I want it to be as short as possible while still conveying what I mean. The initial idea behind the account was that I put out stickers and share them online, [...] it was a black vinyl sheet from the hardware store, which I cut out into a square. Then I wrote on it with a white pen. (*ichdenkeja*)

Supporting the relevance of recognizable aesthetics, *tommy_schwarwel* critically noted how diversifying from sharing his caricatures to showing other projects he worked on led to less follower engagement (see orange circle, Figure 5). Their experiences illustrate a striving to craft and sustain a coherent profile that might enhance a sense of familiarity among followers (Shi et al., 2023). At the same time, it highlights the tension between presenting a polished, consistent image and political stance while revealing the more diverse, 'real' facets of their life and work, a dilemma requiring constant authenticity labor efforts and negotiation for influencers (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022).

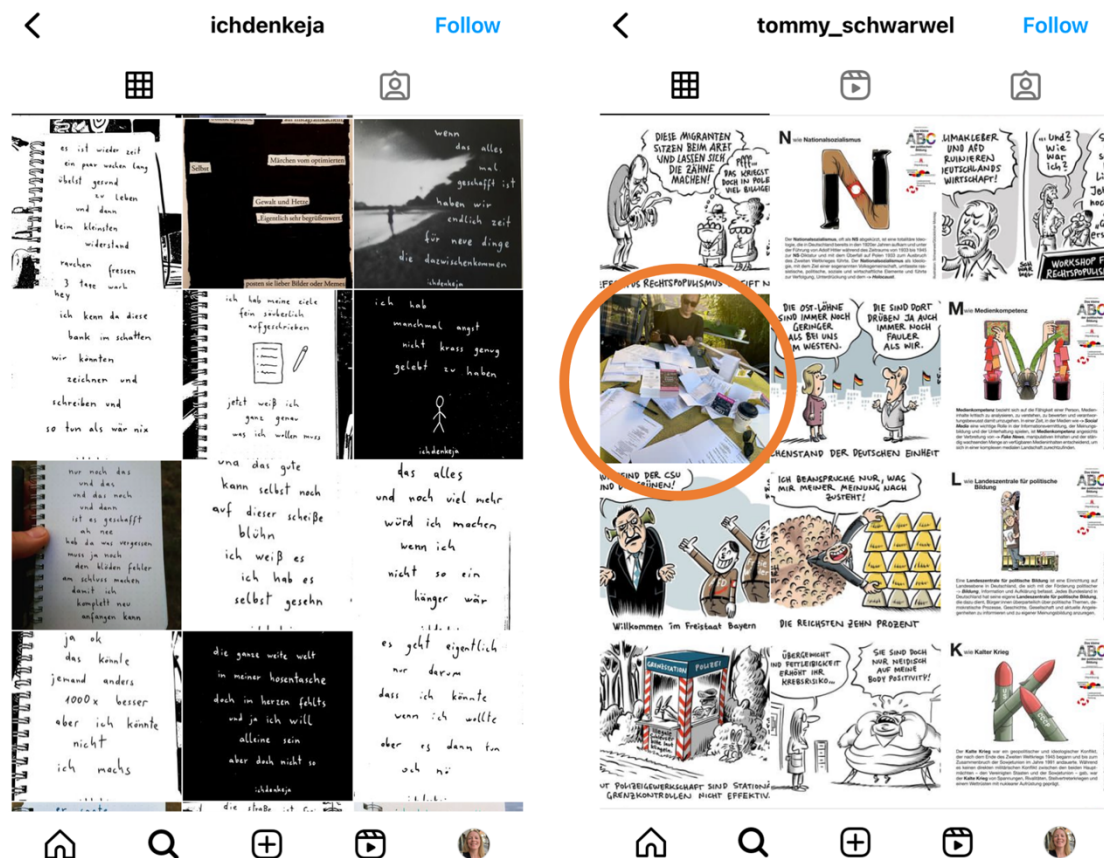


Figure 5. Aesthetical cohesion of political influencers profiles

Utilizing the self-branding framework, analysis showed how political micro-influencers' negotiation also encompassed the frequency of their posting (Balaban & Szambolics, 2022) and the integration of political, private, and professional content, previously associated with showing influencers' 'real', authentic life (Abidin, 2015; Arnesson, 2023). For instance, *tommy_schwarwel* and *betinaschipping* posted (political)

comics almost daily, yet for other interviewees, engaging online is characterized by irregular, spontaneous sharing, and blurry lines between political and other types of content. heyveganjude corrected herself during the interview, saying her account ‘is actually a private – in quotation marks – “private” account’, acknowledging this blurriness between her private and public presence. She then highlighted her spontaneous posting behavior of sharing ‘inspiring food recipes that I tried myself, hiking photos and the occasional photo from a demonstration’ but also contemplated a ‘clean up’ of her profile to create a more coherent account after the interview that would show her political engagement more prominently.

Interviewees also used the Stories feature on Instagram for sharing more diverse and private content while keeping their overall coherence on their profiles. bettinasshipping, a cartoonist, repeatedly covered topics such as climate change in her comics and explained how she used Stories:

Often, I share things that have a connection to my cartoons, but not cartoons, photos. So, if I'm addressing climate issues in my cartoons and then go to a demonstration, I'll post a photo of myself at the demonstration. So, thematically, it's supportive (for the cartoons). Sometimes, I share motifs that are simply funny, like quirky signs or funny street scenes or something like that, not personal stuff. It's more like entertainment that fits this cartoon appearance, no food porn.

Other interviewees shared this approach, describing their stories as a ‘potpourri’ of content (lucielangston). Features such as Stories that are ephemeral promote spontaneity (Gonzalez et al., 2023), allowing political micro-influencers to show different facets of their life and interests while strategically balancing the pursuit of (ideological) coherence.

7. Conclusion

The significance of cultivating an authentic online appearance has been emphasized in social media influencer scholarship (Banet-Weiser, 2021) and is broadly associated with influencers' economic success and their persuasiveness, particularly that of influencers with smaller follower numbers (Lee et al., 2024; Park et al., 2021). When sharing political content, perceptions of authenticity are thought to contribute to perceived credibility, legitimacy and their mobilization potential (Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Lewis, 2020). How political influencers themselves cultivate and sustain authenticity, and how they experience and negotiate authenticity labor, remains under-researched. Drawing on interviews with nine political nano- and micro-influencers, the analysis explored their authenticity labor on Instagram, employing a case-study approach featuring a recent liberalization in abortion regulations in Germany. By engaging with theories of influencer culture and feminist activism, the study offers nuanced insights into what authenticity labor entails in this context and shows how political micro-influencers' authenticity efforts were distinctively shaped by their pursuit of ideological coherence and transparency.

Regarding the question of why political influencers engage in sharing political content, the findings show that the political micro-influencers in this study addressed topics and debates of personal interest on their public Instagram accounts with the intention of informing and mobilizing their networks. Political influencers emphasized that they shared political content because they personally cared about the addressed issues, situating their subjective authenticity at the core of their engagement. This finding nuances previous research that highlighted self-representation as a central motive for political content creation (Winter & Neubaum, 2016) and raises questions about concerns raised regarding inauthentic imitation and commodification of public concern (Phipps, 2016). While this does not suggest that such dynamics are absent among influencers more broadly, the practices observed here indicate that for political influencers with smaller follower numbers, sharing political content was primarily grounded in their personal interests. These personal interests and opinions were reflected in their authenticity strategies when addressing the case study, showing how their motivations for political engagement were intertwined with how they cultivated authenticity online. They opened up about their own experiences with abortions and publicly articulated feminist viewpoints in the debate, practices that are reminiscent of creating disclosive intimacies and relatedness over shared values (Abidin, 2015) and which resonate

with the feminist idea of politicizing the private and accumulating experiential capital for generating political impact (Phipps, 2016).

Analysis further showed how interviewees' engagement in the case study was framed by cultivating an online persona around their personal interests, engaging in authenticity labor and self-branding practices familiar from lifestyle influencers. This included inhabiting topical 'niches' online (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019) and sharing coherent content on their profiles (Marwick, 2015) while also allowing for spontaneous and more private content (Abidin, 2015). The adoption of these practices varied with some maintaining recognizable aesthetics while covering several topical areas, others focused on narrower topical niches but shared various content types. Most distinctively, findings highlighted influencers' commitment to ideological coherence and personal values. In this way, the study extends scholarship on self-branding and authenticity labor by showing how practices rooted in lifestyle and commercial contexts are adapted, contested, and repurposed in explicitly political ways.

The cultivation of authenticity for political micro-influencers emerges as both a personal and strategic practice. By foregrounding personal values and experiences, openly sharing political viewpoints and sustaining coherent online personas, influencers position themselves within broader political debates. These practices also function as strategic tools for directing attention as well as cultivating trust, credibility and political impact (e.g., Gaden & Dumitrica, 2014; Harff & Schmuck, 2024; Hovland et al., 1953). These findings add to our understanding of how political (micro-)influencers present themselves as personally invested and credible alternative information and political socialization agents for their followers. More broadly, their practices reflect how social media has transformed political discourse into a more personalized, participatory, and value-driven space (Andersen et al., 2020; Bennett & Segerberg, 2012).

It is important to note that the present focus lied on political influencers with smaller follower numbers (Ruiz-Gomez, 2019) and their experiences with balancing political and commercial content were limited. How these authenticity strategies apply to larger influencers remains a subject for future research, particularly given risks such as cancel culture or mass reporting, which may disproportionately affect influencers with broader reach and economic dependencies on platforms (Meisner, 2023). While this study takes a progressive outlook – highlighting Instagram as a space supporting information accessibility and democratic engagement – it is important to recognize that platforms also facilitate anti-democratic and extremist activities (Sunstein, 2017). Research shows that reactionary influencers may adopt similar authenticity practices (Lewis, 2020; Maly, 2020), suggesting that understanding authenticity labor is valuable across the ideological spectrum. Methodologically, the §219a case provided a useful anchor to examine how political micro-influencers negotiated and constructed authenticity within broader influencer and feminist contexts. By including influencers' reflections on their posts and reproducing them with their consent, this study offers a unique contribution to social media scholarship, illustrating how influencers construct political messages online.

References

- Abidin, C. (2015). Communicative Intimacies: Influencers and Perceived Interconnectedness. *Ada: A Journal of Gender, New Media, & Technology*(8). <https://scholarsbank.uoregon.edu/xmlui/handle/1794/26365>
- Abidin, C. (2018). *Internet Celebrity: Understanding Fame Online*. Emerald Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.1108/9781787560765>
- Allgaier, J. (2020). Rezo and German climate change policy: The influence of networked expertise on youtube and beyond. *Media and communication (Lisboa)*, 8(2), 376-386. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v8i2.2862>
- Andersen, K., Ohme, J., Bjarnøe, C., Bordacconi, M. J., Albæk, E., & De Vreese, C. H. (2020). *Generational Gaps in Political Media Use and Civic Engagement: From Baby Boomers to Generation Z* (1 ed.). Taylor & Francis. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003111498>
- Andi, S. (2021). How and why do Consumers Access News on Social media? In N. Newman (Ed.), *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2021* (10 ed., pp. 52–57). Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism.

- Arnesson, J. (2023). Influencers as ideological intermediaries: promotional politics and authenticity labour in influencer collaborations. *Media, Culture & Society*, 45(3), 528-544. <https://doi.org/10.1177/01634437221117505>
- Baird, B., & Millar, E. (2020). Abortion at the edges: Politics, practices, performances. *Women's Studies International Forum*, 80, 102372. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.wsif.2020.102372>
- Balaban, D. C., Iancu, I. R., Mustăţea, M., Pavelea, A., & Culic, L. (2020). What Determines Young People to Follow Influencers? The Role of Perceived Information Quality and Trustworthiness on Users' Following Intentions. *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, 22(3), 5-19. <https://doi.org/10.21018/rjcpr.2020.3.306>
- Balaban, D. C., & Szambolics, J. (2022). A Proposed Model of Self-Perceived Authenticity of Social Media Influencers. *Media and Communication*, 10(1), 235-246. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4765>
- Banet-Weiser, S. (2021). Gender, Social Media, and the Labor of Authenticity. *American quarterly*, 73(1), 141-144. <https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2021.0008>
- Bennett, W. L., & Segerberg, A. (2012). THE LOGIC OF CONNECTIVE ACTION: Digital media and the personalization of contentious politics. *Information, Communication & Society*, 15(5), 739-768. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2012.670661>
- Blumer, H. (1954). What is Wrong with Social Theory? *American sociological review*, 19(1), 3-10. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2088165>
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2022). *Thematic analysis: A practical guide*. SAGE Publications Ltd.
- Campbell, C., & Farrell, J. R. (2020). More than meets the eye: The functional components underlying influencer marketing. *Business horizons*, 63(4), 469-479. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bushor.2020.03.003>
- Chen, R., & Sharma, S. K. (2013). Self-disclosure at social networking sites: An exploration through relational capitals. *Information systems frontiers*, 15(2), 269-278. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10796-011-9335-8>
- Dambeck, H. (2019). CDU-Verluste bei Europawahl. Der Rezo-Effekt - echt oder nur gefühlt? *Spiegel Online*. <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/deutschland/rezo-effekt-hat-er-der-cdu-geschadet-oder-den-gruenen-genuetzt-a-1270620.html>
- Dekoninck, H., & Schmuck, D. (2023). The “greenfluence”: Following environmental influencers, parasocial relationships, and youth’s participation behavior. *New media & society*, 26(11), 146144482311561. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231156131>
- Dubois, E., & Ford, H. (2015). Trace Interviews: An Actor-Centered Approach. *International journal of communication*, 9, 2067-2091. <https://doi.org/https://ijoc.org/index.php/ijoc/article/view/3378/141>
- Enli, G. (2015). *Mediated Authenticity: How the Media Constructs Reality*. Peter Lang. <https://doi.org/10.3726/978-1-4539-1458-8>
- franzke, a. s., Bechmann, A., Zimmer, M., Ess, C., & Association of Internet Researchers. (2020). Internet Research: Ethical Guidelines 3.0. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics3.pdf>
- Gaden, G., & Dumitrica, D. (2014). The ‘real deal’: Strategic authenticity, politics and social media. *First Monday*, 20(1). <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.5210/fin.v20i1.4985>
- Goanta, C., & Ranchordás, S. (2020). The regulation of social media influencers: An introduction. In *The Regulation of Social Media Influencers* (pp. 1-20). Edward Elgar Publishing. <https://doi.org/10.4337/9781788978286.00008>
- Gonzalez, A., Schmuck, D., & Vandenbosch, L. (2023). Posting and framing politics: a content analysis of celebrities’, athletes’, and influencers’ Instagram political content. *Information, Communication & Society*, 27(8), 1605-1627. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2023.2285495>
- Hanisch, C. (1969). The Personal Is Political. <https://www.carolhanisch.org/CHwritings/PIP.html>
- Harff, D. (2022). Political content from virtual ‘friends’: How influencers arouse young women’s political interest via parasocial relationships. *The Journal of Social Media in Society*, 11(2), 97-121. <https://doi.org/https://thejsms.org/index.php/JSMS/article/view/1053>
- Harff, D., & Schmuck, D. (2024). Is authenticity key? Mobilization by social media influencers versus celebrities and young people's political participation. *Psychology & Marketing*, 41(11), 2757-2771. <https://doi.org/10.1002/mar.22082>
- Hovland, C. I., Janis, I. L., & Kelley, H. H. (1953). Communication and persuasion.
- Hudders, L., De Jans, S., & De Veirman, M. (2021). The commercialization of social media stars: A literature review and conceptual framework on the strategic use of social media influencers. *International journal of advertising*, 40(3), 327-375. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02650487.2020.1836925>
- Hund, E. (2023). *The Influencer Industry: The Quest for Authenticity on Social Media*. Princeton University Press.
- Jaramillo-Dent, D., Contreras-Pulido, P., & Perez-Rodriguez, A. (2022). Immigrant Influencers on TikTok: Diverse Microcelebrity Profiles and Algorithmic. *Media and Communication*, 10(1), 208-221. <https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v10i1.4743>
- Katz, E. (1957). The Two-Step Flow of Communication: An Up-To-Date Report on an Hypothesis. *Public opinion quarterly*, 21(1), 61-78. <https://doi.org/10.1086/266687>
- Khamis, S., Ang, L., & Welling, R. (2017). Self-branding, ‘micro-celebrity’ and the rise of Social Media Influencers. *Celebrity studies*, 8(2), 191-208. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19392397.2016.1218292>

- Kivisto, P., & Pittman, D. (2013). Goffman's Dramaturgical Sociology: Personal Sales and Service in a Commodified World. In *Illuminating Social Life: Classical and Contemporary Theory Revisited* (6 ed.). SAGE Publications, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.4135/9781506335483>
- Laestadius, L., & Witt, A. (2022). Instagram Revisited. In A. Quan-Haase & L. Sloan (Eds.), *The SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* (pp. 581-597). SAGE Publications, Limited. <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/adelaide/detail.action?docID=7080076>
- Lau, M. (2022). Frauenrechte in Deutschland: Vor dem Streit. [Women's rights in Germany: Before the dispute.]. *Die Zeit*. <https://www.zeit.de/2022/27/deutschland-schwangerschaftsabbruch-spd-gruenen-debatte/komplettansicht>
- Lazarsfeld, P. F., Berelson, B., & Gaudet, H. (1948). *The people's choice: How the voter makes up his mind in a presidential campaign* (3rd ed.). Columbia University Press.
- Leaver, T., Highfield, T., & Abidin, C. (2020). *Instagram: Visual Social Media Cultures*. Polity.
- Lee, J., Walter, N., Hayes, J. L., & Golan, G. J. (2024). Do Influencers Influence? A Meta-Analytic Comparison of Celebrities and Social Media Influencers Effects. *Social media + society*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051241269269>
- Lewis, R. (2020). "This Is What the News Won't Show You": YouTube Creators and the Reactionary Politics of Micro-celebrity. *Television & New Media*, 21(2), 201-217. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476419879919>
- Lloyd, K. (2023). Embracing the Power of Yoni Art. <https://katiellloyd.com.au/embracing-the-power-of-yni-art/>
- Luebke, S. M., & Engelmann, I. (2026). "Vote for Me, I Am Authentic": Performed Political Authenticity on Social Media. *Media and Communication*, 14.
- Maly, I. (2020). Metapolitical new right influencers: The case of Brittany Pettibone. *Social Sciences*, 9(7), 1-22. <https://doi.org/10.3390/SOCSCI9070113>
- Manning, N., Penfold-Mounce, R., Loader, B. D., Vromen, A., & Xenos, M. (2017). Politicians, celebrities and social media: a case of informalisation? *Journal of youth studies*, 20(2), 127-144.
- Markham, A., & Buchanan, E. (2012). Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AoIR Ethics Working Committee (Version 2.0). <http://www.aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>
- Marwick, A. E. (2013). *Status Update: Celebrity, Publicity, and Branding in the Social Media Age*. Yale University Press. <https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300199154>
- Marwick, A. E. (2015). You May Know Me from YouTube: (Micro-)Celebrity in Social Media. In P. D. Marshall & S. Redmond (Eds.), *A Companion to Celebrity* (pp. 333-350). John Wiley & Sons, Inc. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118475089.ch18>
- McRae, S. (2017). Get off my internets: How anti-fans deconstruct lifestyle bloggers' authenticity work. *Persona Studies*, 3(1), 13-27. <https://doi.org/10.21153/ps2017vol3no1art640>
- Meisner, C. (2023). The weaponization of platform governance: Mass reporting and algorithmic punishments in the creator economy. *Policy and internet*, 15(4), 466-477. <https://doi.org/10.1002/poi3.359>
- Mendes, K., Ringrose, J., & Keller, J. (2019). *Digital Feminist Activism: Girls and Women Fight Back Against Rape Culture*. Oxford University Press. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780190697846.001.0001>
- Mutz, D. C. (1998). *Impersonal Influence: How Perceptions of Mass Collectives Affect Political Attitudes*. Cambridge University Press.
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Eddy, K., & Nielsen, R. K. (2022). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2022*. <https://reutersinstitute.politics.ox.ac.uk/digital-news-report/2022>
- Newman, N., Fletcher, R., Robertson, C. T., Ross Arguedas, A., & Nielsen, R. K. (2024). *Reuters Institute Digital News Report 2024*. <https://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:219692c0-85ce-4cab-9cbc-d3cdffabf62b/files/s2b88qf06s>
- Park, J., Lee, J. M., Xiong, V. Y., Septianto, F., & Seo, Y. (2021). David and Goliath: When and Why Micro-Influencers Are More Persuasive Than Mega-Influencers. *Journal of advertising*, 50(5), 584-602. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00913367.2021.1980470>
- Patton, M. Q. (2002). *Qualitative research & evaluation methods* (3rd ed.). Sage Publications.
- Peter, C., & Muth, L. (2023). Social Media Influencers' Role in Shaping Political Opinions and Actions of Young Audiences. *Media and Communication*, 11(3), 164-174. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.17645/mac.v11i3.6750>
- Phipps, A. (2016). Whose personal is more political? Experience in contemporary feminist politics. *Feminist Theory*, 17(3), 303-321. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1464700116663831>
- Pöyry, E., Pelkonen, M., Naumanen, E., & Laaksonen, S.-M. (2019). A Call for Authenticity: Audience Responses to Social Media Influencer Endorsements in Strategic Communication. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 13(4), 336-351. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2019.1609965>
- Riedl, M., Schwemmer, C., Ziewiecki, S., & Ross, L. M. (2021). The Rise of Political Influencers—Perspectives on a Trend Towards Meaningful Content. *Frontiers in communication*, 6, 1-7. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fcomm.2021.752656>
- Riedl, M. J., Lukito, J., & Woolley, S. C. (2023). Political Influencers on Social Media: An Introduction. *Social media + society*, 9(2), 205630512311779. <https://doi.org/10.1177/20563051231177938>
- Ruiz-Gomez, A. (2019). Digital Fame and Fortune in the age of Social Media: A Classification of Social Media Influencers. *adResearch ESIC International Journal of Communication Research*, 19(19), 8-29. <https://doi.org/10.7263/adresic-019-01>

- Scharff, C. (2023). Are we all influencers now? Feminist activists discuss the distinction between being an activist and an influencer. *Feminist Theory*, 25(3), 454-470. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14647001231201062>
- Schmuck, D., Hirsch, M., Stevic, A., & Matthes, J. (2022). Politics – Simply Explained? How Influencers Affect Youth's Perceived Simplification of Politics, Political Cynicism, and Political Interest. *The international journal of press/politics*, 27(3), 738-762. <https://doi.org/10.1177/19401612221088987>
- Schwarz, K. C., & Williams, J. P. (2020). Introduction to the social construction of identity and authenticity. In J. P. Williams & K. C. Schwarz (Eds.), *Studies on the Social Construction of Identity and Authenticity* (Vol. 1, pp. 1-24). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429027987-1>
- Senft, T. M. (2008). *Camgirls: celebrity & community in the age of social networks* (Vol. 4). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Senft, T. M. (2013). Microcelebrity and the Branded Self. In J. Hartley, J. Burgess, & A. Bruns (Eds.), *A companion to new media dynamics* (pp. 346-354). Wiley-Blackwell. <https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118321607.ch22>
- Shi, J., Lai, K. K., & Chen, G. (2023). Examining retweeting behavior on social networking sites from the perspective of self-presentation. *PloS one*, 18(5), 1-22. <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0286135>
- Sonix. (2023). *sonix.ai*. In <https://sonix.ai>
- Sunstein, C. R. (2017). *#Republic: Divided democracy in the age of social media*. Princeton University Press.
- Suuronen, A., Reinikainen, H., Borchers, N. S., & Strandberg, K. (2022). When Social Media Influencers go Political: An Exploratory Analysis on the Emergence of Political Topics Among Finnish Influencers. *Javnost - The Public*, 29(3), 301-317. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13183222.2021.1983367>
- The Federal Government. (2022). *Ban on advertising for abortions: Cabinet approves repeal of Section 219a*. <https://www.bundesregierung.de/breg-en/search/section-219a-2011846>
- VERBI Software. (2023). *MAXQDA 2024*. In VERBI Software. maxqda.com
- von Sikorski, C., Merz, P., Heiss, R., Karsay, K., Naderer, B., & Schmuck, D. (2025). The Political Role of Social Media Influencers: Strategies, Types, and Implications for Democracy—An Introduction. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 0(00), 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00027642251344208>
- Wellman, M. L., Stoldt, R., Tully, M., & Ekdale, B. (2020). Ethics of Authenticity: Social Media Influencers and the Production of Sponsored Content. *Journal of Media Ethics*, 35(2), 68-82. <https://doi.org/10.1080/23736992.2020.1736078>
- Winter, S., & Neubaum, G. (2016). Examining Characteristics of Opinion Leaders in Social Media: A Motivational Approach. *Social media + society*, 2(3), 1-12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305116665858>
- Winter, S., Neubaum, G., Stieglitz, S., & Ross, B. (2021). Opinionleaders: a comparison of self-reported and observable influence of Twitter users. *Information, Communication & Society*, 24(11), 1533-1550. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2019.1705374>