

Abstract for the DGPuK-Conference

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Pandemic user engagement

Exploring content characteristics of news media articles triggering user engagement on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic

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The submission has (a) not yet been published in writing, and (b) not been submitted, accepted, or presented at another conference.

Pandemic user engagement: Exploring content characteristics of news media articles triggering user engagement on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic

Theory & Research questions

Understanding the posting of news media articles and its user engagement on social media is crucial as politics, media and the public face the challenge of distributing content across different platforms to reach and engage audiences. On Facebook, content distribution is shaped by both platforms' algorithms and user engagement (likes, comments, shares, reactions). These interactions indicate whether users perceive content as relevant or how they evaluate content, but also political and media actors utilize them to assess past success and shape future communication strategies accordingly (Porten-Che   et al., 2018). Furthermore, they offer information about the potential effects of news media content on public engagement, whereas content generating greater user engagement seems to gain greater visibility and reach more people on Facebook (Trilling et al., 2017). Particularly during times of high uncertainty, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, it may be decisive for peoples' health and safety what information gets posted and gains more visibility.

Our study investigates what content characteristics of news media articles (RQ1) affect the number of comments, shares, likes, love, and angry reactions and (RQ2) influence how often they get posted on media, political, and public accounts on Facebook during the COVID-19 pandemic. Derived from news values theory and the concept of shareworthiness (Trilling et al., 2017), we concentrate on three content characteristics: 1) *evaluative aspects*, e.g., overall tone and expressing criticism; 2) *triggers of emotions*, e.g., evoking anger or happiness; and 3) *framing of debates and decisions*, e.g., (anti-)alarmism and freedom vs. safety. Additionally, as audiences differ between actors, the source of the Facebook page (media, party, or politician), and the media outlet might also influence user engagement (Tenenboim, 2022).

Previous studies have concentrated on the connection between specific content characteristics and singular modes of engagement, mostly in the realm of electoral communication (Porten-Che   et al., 2018; Trilling et al., 2017). Thus, more attention is needed to possible relationships between different types of news content-related characteristics and engagement modes.

Method

First, we gathered content characteristics as independent variables with a manual content analysis. 9 trained coders analyzed a sample of 3,169 news media articles about COVID-19 between January 2020 and December 2021 from the websites of 7 national, 2 regional, and 2

alternative German media outlets with different reach, and editorial lines. For reliability testing, a random sample of 47 news articles was coded, revealing a common understanding for all eight content categories relevant for this analysis (see Table 1).

Second, our dependent variable concerns the total number of likes, comments, shares, and reactions (love, angry) each of our coded news articles received on the 1,769 Facebook pages where they were shared. We gathered them by analyzing if the coded articles were posted on any public Facebook page by looking up each articles' URL using the CrowdTangle URL-Search API and saving the respective engagement numbers.

Results

Regarding RQ1, the results reveal (see Figure 1) that content with *negative evaluations* of actors and dissent in politics stimulates increased sharing and angry reactions. Articles that take stances on COVID-19 measures, either pro or contra, evoke *emotional engagement* in the form of 'love' reactions but have less shareability. Interestingly, the *framing* also significantly influenced engagement metrics; anti-alarmist articles were less likely to be shared or commented on but garnered more 'love' reactions. Meanwhile, articles with a focus on safety gained multifaceted engagement—ranging from likes and shares to 'love' and 'angry' reactions. Our findings also point out that the *type of account* posting the news article matters for engagement, with articles posted on party pages receiving less engagement compared to those posted on media or candidate pages. Last, the media outlet matters for user engagement, too (see Figure 2). While articles from all traditional national media receive comments and likes, alternative media articles are more shared, and RT Deutsch articles cause angry reactions, while Nachdenkseiten articles are more liked.

Regarding RQ2, our results indicate that whether and how often an article gets posted is driven by the content characteristics of dissent of politics and public opinion contra measures. However, the use of frames (safety, freedom, anti-alarmism) also triggers the posting on Facebook.

Discussion

In conclusion, results suggest that content units can be understood not only as more engaging or less engaging than others, but also as engaging in different ways, ultimately deciding over what gets posted and gains more visibility. Our insights underscore that the dynamics of user engagement are complex and influenced by multiple factors, advocating for a more integrative approach to studying this phenomenon in future research. In the presentation, further results

will be discussed against the backdrop of mentioned theories, and consequences for political opinion formation in crises will be explained.

Literature

Porten-Cheé, P., Haßler, J., Jost, P., Eilders, C., & Maurer, M. (2018). Popularity cues in online media: Theoretical and methodological perspectives in political communication research. *Studies in Communication and Media*, 7(2), 208-230.

Tenenboim, O. (2022). Comments, shares, or likes: What makes news posts engaging in different ways. *Social Media + Society*, 8(4).

Trilling D., Tolochko P., Burscher B. (2017). From newsworthiness to shareworthiness: How to predict news sharing based on article characteristics. *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly*, 94(1), 38–60.

Attachment

Table 1. Reliability coefficients for Holsti's CR and Krippendorff's α (N=47).

Variable name	Coder instructions	Holsti's CR	Krippendorff's α
Evaluative aspects			
Negative evaluation of actors	Coding of the overall positive/negative evaluation of actors in the article (5-point scale)	0.881	0.749
Negative evaluation of Corona measures	Coding of the overall positive/negative evaluation of COVID-19 measures in the article (5-point scale)	0.865	0.833
Public opinion pro vs. contra measures	Coding of article's portrayal of public support/disapproval on COVID-19 measures (5-point scale)	0.901	0.706
Triggers of emotions			
Dissent/Consensus of politics	Coding of the article's extent of dissent/consensus among politicians dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic (5-point scale)	0.870	0.735
Dissent/Consensus of science	Coding of the article's extent of dissent/consensus among scientists dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic (5-point scale)	0.879	0.748
Restricting/Loosening Corona measures	Coding if the article discusses restricting/loosening of COVID-19 measures (5-point scale).	0.927	0.774
Framing of debates and decisions			
Frame: Alarmism vs. Anti-Alarmism	Coding if the article leans towards alarmism or anti-alarmism regarding COVID-19 (5-point scale).	0.864	0.770
Frame: Freedom vs. Security	Coding whether an article framed the question of COVID-19 measures as an issue of freedom or safety (5-point-scale)	0.855	0.740

Figure 1. Content characteristic drivers of engagement metrics (negative-binominal regression)

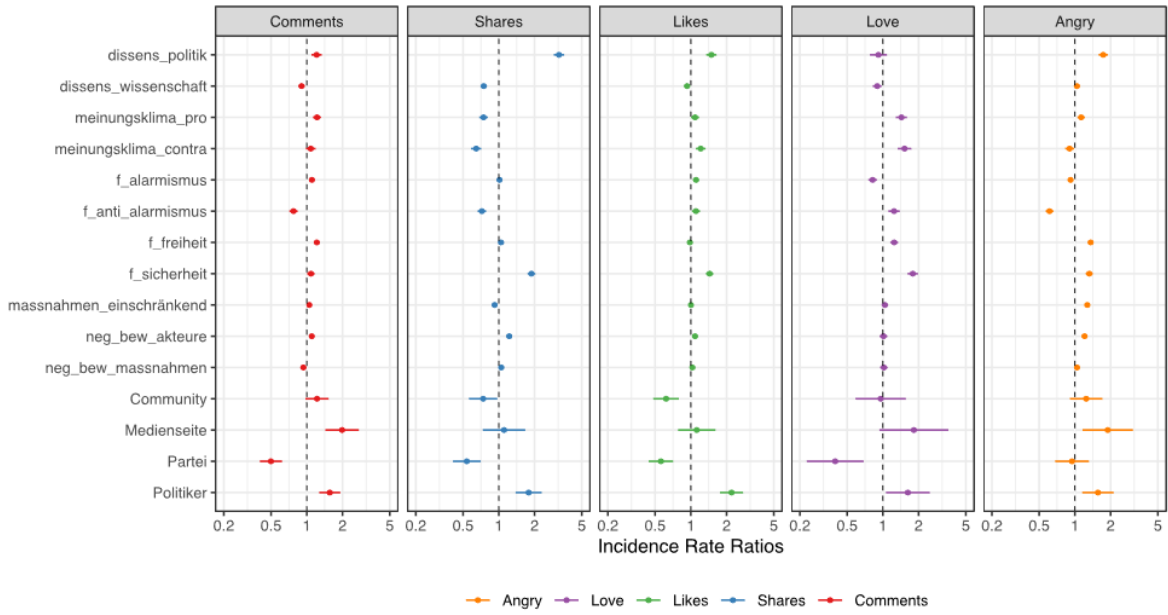


Figure 2. Engagement metrics and media outlets (Ratio normalised by medium)

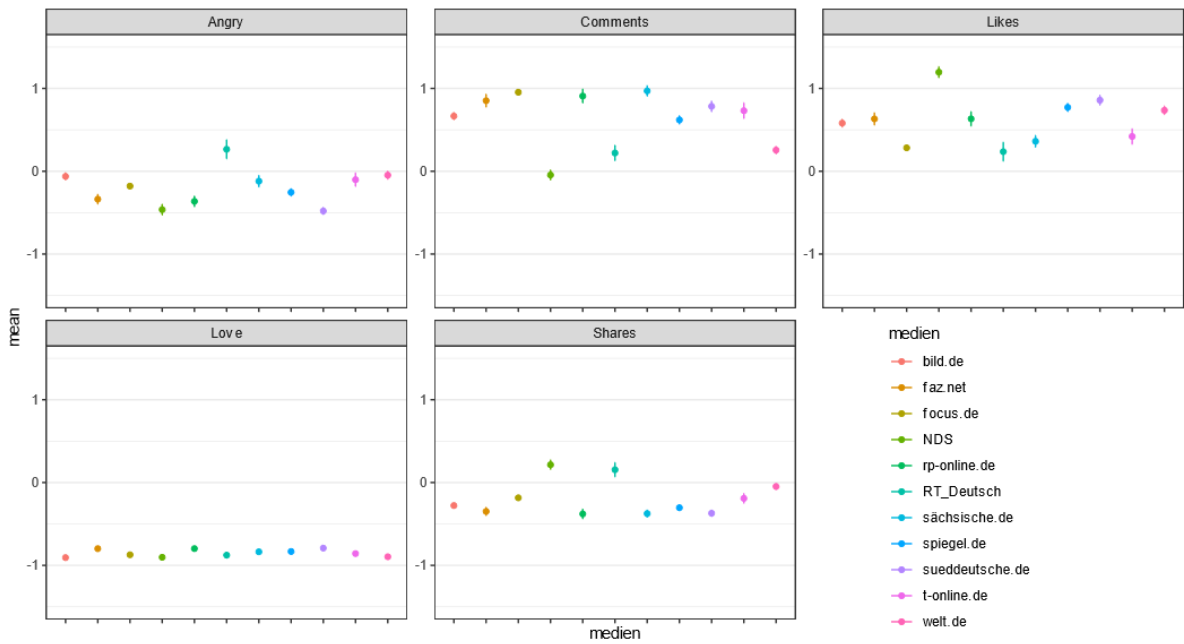


Figure 3. Content characteristic drivers of posting (yes/no) and number of posting on Facebook pages

