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Digital Political Participation in Urban and Rural Contexts

How Young Adults from Germany Perceive and Use Social Media as Interfaces
for Political Participation

Research Article by

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Introduction

Social media has become an integral part of public life today. Whether for entertainment, gathering information or communicating with social contacts. An ever-increasing part of public life, particularly among young adults, now takes place on these digital platforms (Brough, 2020). It is therefore not surprising that politics is also increasingly taking place online, and that access to political information, as well as political networking and participation, are shifting further and further into digital spaces. Digital political participation enables political content to reach a wide audience quickly and easily, as well as facilitating a highly interactive form of participation in which communication on political issues is significantly simplified (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Social media also enables very low-threshold access to political networking and participation, as access to the platforms is generally very open and there is additional freedom in the creation and dissemination of one's own content (Brough, 2020), which, however, also gives rise to risks, as the openness of social media to content and information can also facilitate the spread of fake news and disinformation (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021).

Social media simplifies and accelerates communication and, consequently, political networking and participation (Castells, 2012, cited in Brough, 2020). This occurs through background processes that filter, sort and structure information. In the case of social media platforms, we are referring to algorithmic processes that select the content shown to us, as well as that which remains hidden from us (Lipp et al., 2024). This makes social media interfaces for political participation. They enable and simplify interaction and thus also digital participation by reducing the complexity of information, but are also associated with restrictions and the influencing of political perception (Nake, 2019, cited in Lipp et al., 2024), (Hookway, 2014; Galloway, 2012, cited in Lipp et al., 2024).

Given their accessibility, social media can offer an alternative and an opportunity for political participation, particularly for people who would otherwise be denied or find it difficult to access forms of political participation. In particular, people from rural regions of Germany often have fewer opportunities to access political services and participate than those living in urban areas, simply because the range of political services in small rural communities is often significantly more limited (Denters et al., 2014, cited in McDonnell, 2020). But how are social media perceived and used as interfaces for political participation in a rural context, particularly by young adults who are themselves politically active? Can they compensate for the lack of local political opportunities, and is such compensation even needed or demanded? This leads to the question of how, by comparison, social media as interfaces are perceived and used by young politically

active adults in cities. Are there differences in the relevance attributed to social media in terms of access to political information and participation, as well as in political activities?

This research aims to address this issue, namely the comparison of the perception and use of social media as interfaces for political participation in urban and rural contexts, as, to date, social media in their function as interfaces have been little discussed or analysed in a comparative study of urban and rural regions of Germany. This leads to the following research question:

How do young, politically active adults from urban and rural regions in Germany experience and use social media as interfaces for political participation?

To explore this question, there will first be an outline of the theoretical framework, comprising three theoretical concepts: ‘Digital Political Participation’, ‘Social Media as Interfaces for Political Participation’ and ‘Urban-Rural Differences in Infrastructure and Participation Possibilities’. These serve as the theoretical basis for the methodological approach and the analysis of the data. A qualitative methodological approach was adopted to answer the research question. Semi-structured interviews with a certain degree of ethnographic openness, were conducted with three young adults from a rural and an urban region in Hesse. The interview guide was deductively based on the theoretical concepts. The findings from the analysis of the interview data were, in part, very surprising, caused some confusion and clearly demonstrated the ambivalence of social media as interfaces for political participation. A fundamental insight emerging from the interviews and the comparison of the urban and rural contexts is that the relevance of social media, particularly for young adults in their participation in public life and politics, is sometimes overestimated. In particular, the perceptions of interviewees from rural areas made it clear that, whilst social media as interfaces can facilitate and accelerate certain aspects of political participation and networking, and are indeed perceived as highly relevant for this purpose, they cannot replace the social interaction that still appears to play a major role, particularly in rural regions, even in the context of participation. The role that social media often plays in urban areas with regard to political participation, namely the fundamental networking of people, is still largely carried out in rural areas of Germany, at least in part, by socially established structures and networks, which are often perceived as even more relevant for networking and participation than social media.

Theoretical Framework

To explore the theoretical concepts that form the basis of this research, political participation must first be defined as a fundamental concept. Jan W. van Deth views political participation as a rather broad and inclusive concept, as a very narrow definition no longer does justice to today's fast-paced world and the various forms of participation. He therefore defines participation as: "an abstract or general concept that covers voluntary activities by citizens usually related to government, politics or the state. In addition, these activities can be aimed at solving community problems or, in even more general terms, they can be 'attempts to alter systematic patterns of social behaviour' being 'devoted to influencing the collective life of the polity' or aiming to 'induce significant social reform'." (van Deth, 2014, p. 353). Furthermore, van Deth defines a concept that also includes the goals and motivations of an action, as well as forms outside the sphere of the state and politics, thereby taking into account newly emerging forms of political participation (van Deth, 2014). Thus, according to Jan van Deth (van Deth, 2014, pp. 357, 359), 'targeted political participation' and 'motivational political participation' are also to be incorporated into the concept of political participation underpinning this study.

A broad and inclusive concept of political participation is essential when considering new and, especially digital forms of participation on social media, where it remains a matter of academic debate whether online participation merely complements existing forms of the concept or constitutes a new type (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013; Nam, 2012; Oser & Hooghe, 2013, cited in Engel, 2019), (Theocharis & van Deth, 2016). What is certain, however, is that social media are fundamentally changing the way in which people can participate politically, as they offer a new infrastructure that makes communication and interaction more autonomous, simplifies and accelerates them, and makes participation more interactive (Castells, 2012, cited in Brough, 2020). Digital political participation is one of three theoretical concepts on which this work is based.

Digital Political Participation

Social media are platforms on which young people in particular interact with one another and participate in society and, increasingly, in politics (Brough, 2020). As a large part of young adults' public and social lives now takes place on such platforms, it is not surprising that the venues for political participation are also shifting, at least in part, into the digital space. Social media facilitates networking with like-minded people and the sharing of information, leading

to the emergence of new public spheres on these digital platforms, within which political participation can then also take place (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021).

Online participation differs from other forms of political participation in several ways, as social media are bringing about lasting changes to the way we communicate with one another, how information is shared, and how people engage with and participate in society and politics (Stein et al., 2025a). Actions through which users of social media platforms can express themselves politically and participate include “posting or sharing links, commenting and encouraging other people to take action” (Smith, 2013, cited in Theocharis & van Deth, 2016, p. 146). Online petitions circulated via social media and the organisation of political campaigns through such platforms also count as digital political participation (Engelmann, 2019).

Digital political participation is defined by the fact that a wider reach can be achieved with minimal effort. Furthermore, this type of participation is much more communicative and interactive than other forms, as, unlike with other types of participation, it is possible to respond directly to comments and content (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013). Moreover, social media platforms are exceptionally low-threshold compared to other places where political participation takes place. Access to information, as well as the creation and sharing of posts, is simplified and accelerated (Brough, 2020). Due to this low barrier to entry and the ability to build reach quickly, social media has developed into a global platform, particularly for young people, through which they can express their political views particularly effectively (Loader et al., 2014).

Social media exhibits three further characteristics that greatly facilitate political participation. Firstly, social media are dialogue-centred platforms and foster democratic networking, which in turn can have a positive impact on political participation (Brough, 2020). Secondly, the horizontal nature of social media facilitates digital political participation, as theoretically no hierarchical structures exist and everything is based on voluntary cooperation (Benkler, 2013, cited in Brough, 2020). As a third feature that promotes participation, social media exhibits openness, which relates particularly to content. There is therefore, in theory, no limit to the content on social media. Furthermore, in theory, everyone on digital platforms has the opportunity to post something themselves (Brough, 2020). A dangerous aspect of social media is closely linked to this very point. As every user can generate content themselves, a flood of information and content arises that is almost impossible to verify. There is also the risk of the spread of misinformation and populist and dangerous content, which can also be exploited by extremist groups (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021).

Despite some risks, however, there are also opportunities associated with digital political participation. Among other things, it can have a positive impact on the political engagement of young people who might otherwise have less access to other forms of participation (Brough, 2020). Social media thus have a direct influence on people's political engagement and can strengthen it (Loader et al., 2014). At the same time, digital political participation can foster a sense of political efficacy (Rowland et al., 2024), as networking is made easier to collectively influence politics. Whilst digital political participation continues to grow, other forms of participation are losing relevance among younger generations, and participation is becoming more individualised and flexible through social media, as there are no fixed forms in which political participation manifests itself there (Loader et al., 2014), (Gibson & Cantijoch, 2013).

Many of the characteristics that social media possess as spaces for political participation and networking clearly demonstrate that social media function as interfaces for human interaction, facilitating and structuring communication, and thus participation, in many ways. This makes social media interfaces for political participation, which constitutes the second theoretical concept underpinning this study.

Social Media as Interfaces for Political Participation

In order to define social media as interfaces for political participation, the term 'interfaces' must first be briefly explained. Interfaces are points of contact that mediate, enable and structure interaction and communication. In doing so, boundaries are drawn which reduce the complexity of the interaction and the transfer of information, as each side of the interaction can ignore the complexity of the other side (Nake, 2019, cited in Lipp et al., 2024, p. 3). This implies that interaction is simplified by this very reduction in complexity, yet is also restricted in the process, as information is filtered and sorted out. Interfaces thus enable interaction only by also limiting it in a certain way. Exactly how interfaces function in this networking and structuring remains hidden from users (Lipp et al., 2024). The boundaries drawn during interface processes also restrict, in this context, the information passed on through such interfaces and thus determine access to information. This makes interfaces highly political instruments (Distelmeyer, 2018, cited in Lipp et al., 2024). Through this filtering and concealment of specific information, they can influence political perceptions and even worldviews (Galloway, 2012, cited in Lipp et al., 2024). In doing so, they exert a significant influence on political discourse.

Interface processes also take place on social media platforms. They provide an infrastructure that greatly accelerates and simplifies communication (Castells, 2012, cited in Brough, 2020).

This occurs because social media platforms offer low barriers to entry and strongly support the dissemination of users' own content (Brough, 2020). The dissemination of information is also greatly simplified by interface processes (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021).

Three further characteristics of social media, already mentioned, clearly indicate that they function as interfaces. They have a horizontal structure, they encourage dialogue, and they are open in terms of content (Brough, 2020). These characteristics are crucial for enabling interaction and communication on these platforms. Communication is made possible globally by the infrastructure provided and facilitates international networking on political issues (Loader et al., 2014). This makes social media highly effective interfaces for political participation, as protest movements can take on a global scale through networking.

Interface processes in social media are also evident in the influence these platforms have on users' views and behaviour. In social media, processes that sort and select information run unnoticed in the background (Shah, 2019, cited in Lipp et al., 2024). Due to the enormous volume of data on digital platforms, content and information must be sorted and selected to a certain extent. Otherwise, social media would be too complex, which in turn could restrict interaction. As social media are so complex as interfaces, communication and information must also be processed in a more complex manner through interface processes. On digital platforms, algorithmic processes are used as interface processes to ensure that information is filtered, selected and structured (Lipp et al., 2024). This means that social media influences the perceptions and attitudes of its users. As algorithms select which content is displayed to users, they simultaneously distinguish between important and unimportant information. Some content thus remains hidden in the background and cannot be incorporated into the formation of personal opinions. This can significantly influence political attitudes (Hookway, 2014; Galloway, 2012, cited in Lipp et al., 2024). It is not only the selection of the information and content displayed that is regulated by social media interface processes, but also access. For instance, some platforms impose access restrictions in the form of age limits, or access depends on an administrator who must invite users to the platform. Social media platforms, as interfaces, thus influence who is granted access and who is not, and can consequently also exclude individuals from access (Lipp et al., 2024).

The characteristics of social media as interfaces mentioned above also give rise to negative consequences of these interface processes. Algorithms can obscure diverse political views, thereby depriving them of visibility within society. At the same time, algorithms can also promote problematic content. This can facilitate the spread of disinformation, fake news, populist or even extremist content (Iosifidis & Nicoli, 2021). Furthermore, due to the way they function,

algorithms tend to reinforce users' own political views by displaying content that supports them and concealing opposing opinions (Engelmann, 2019). This can result in a very one-sided understanding of politics and foster polarisation within society.

Due to the access restrictions arising from interface processes, certain groups are denied access or visibility for a variety of reasons. Access to digital political participation may therefore depend, amongst other things, on discriminatory factors such as class, gender, culture or sexuality. Place of residence and financial circumstances can also affect access to digital political participation (Loader et al., 2014), as financial circumstances determine whether people can afford a mobile device and thus gain access to digital platforms at all. Place of residence can affect how well one is connected to infrastructure, or what opportunities for access to political services and forms of participation actually exist. This raises the question of what influence differences between urban and rural regions fundamentally have on access to political participation and the use of social media to engage in politics. First, however, it is necessary to define what the differences between urban and rural regions are in relation to politics.

Urban-Rural Differences in Infrastructure and Opportunities for Participation

Rural regions face a range of problems and challenges compared to cities. Firstly, demographic change affects small towns and villages more severely, as the effects of population decline and an ageing population are felt more acutely there due to the smaller population sizes (Martinez Juan & McEldowney, 2021). Furthermore, many rural regions have poorer digital infrastructure connectivity compared to cities, although rural communities in particular, due to their isolation from urban regions, are dependent on a well-developed digital infrastructure (Salemink et al., 2017; Sylvester & McGlynn, 2010, cited in Stein et al., 2025a). The disparities in digital infrastructure development are still evident today, particularly in broadband expansions, where the gaps remain significant in some cases (European Commission 2022, cited in Stein et al., 2025b). However, public transport infrastructure also poses a major problem for many residents of rural regions, as good connections to public transport are often lacking. People are therefore heavily reliant on cars (Harris et al., 2025). This is one of the key factors when it comes to access to political services. If one does not own a car and is reliant on public transport, it is difficult to take advantage of political opportunities outside one's own place of residence, which is often necessary, as rural regions have fewer political opportunities than cities (Effing, 2021). The provision of services by social and political organisations, and thus also access to these services and to participation, therefore depend to a large extent on the size of the place of residence and

determine how well young people can participate in politics and society (Denters et al., 2014, cited in McDonnell, 2020).

A key difference between urban and rural areas lies in their respective social structures, which are shaped by a wide variety of factors (Effing, 2021). In rural communities, for instance, there is often already a well-established and strong social network linking different individuals and groups, which is also drawn upon in the context of participation, thereby potentially accelerating political processes (Heinisch et al., 2018, cited in McDonnell, 2020). As a rule, establishing contact is easier there, as many connections already exist beforehand. This often means that networking on social or political issues arises where it already exists, and thus everything takes place within a relatively rigid social environment (Stein et al., 2025b).

Furthermore, apolitical groups in rural areas tend to act politically to some extent, as political processes sometimes take place within associations or these groups attempt to influence politics in order to achieve personal goals (Effing, 2021). Political participation in rural regions therefore also takes place in other formats and not just within the traditional structures, which include political parties, etc. (Möltgen-Sicking, 2021, cited in Effing, 2021). In cities, by contrast, political parties and similar institutions remain the central hubs of political networking and political processes (Effing, 2021). A final factor in which differences between urban and rural regions manifest themselves, is the sense of the efficacy of political participation. Thus, there is a somewhat the assumption among the urban population that the rural population has more influence on politics, whilst the population of rural regions perceives the opposite (Rowland et al., 2024). According to McDonnell, however, figures clearly show that the level of political participation and political efficacy in rural regions is generally higher (McDonnell, 2020, p. 333).

This paints a picture of urban regions as having the necessary infrastructure at their disposal and a generally wide range of political opportunities. In rural regions, by contrast, there is a lack of political opportunities and often a lack of infrastructure as well. There, social structures outside of traditional political institutions play a greater role in society and create local social networks.

The three theoretical concepts and principles presented here demonstrate how digital political participation stands out as a distinct form of political participation and why social media can be regarded as interfaces for political participation. Differences between urban and rural regions in terms of infrastructure, opportunities and access to political participation have also been highlighted. But what role do social media play within these specific structures of urban and

rural regions as platforms on which political networking takes place? What influence do they have in cities and rural communities in enabling young adults in particular to access politics and participation, and how are social media perceived as interfaces for political participation in each of these contexts? This leads once again to the research question: *“How do young, politically active adults from urban and rural regions in Germany experience and use social media as interfaces for political participation?”*, which will be addressed using semi-structured interviews as a method.

Methodological Approach – Semi-Structured Interviews and Ethnographic Openness

The methodological approach chosen for this research was semi-structured interviews conducted with a degree of ethnographic openness, as political participation on social media platforms is a rather subjectively motivated and flexible form of political participation. A wide variety of actions can be perceived as political engagement there, which makes digital political participation difficult to define as a concept (van Deth, 2014). Ethnographic openness can be particularly useful as an aspect of the interviews when analysing the ‘everyday routine’ and ‘informal’ aspects of politics (Nullmeier et al., 2003, cited in Kaiser, 2020, p. 289). In particular, perceptions of digital political participation and of access to politics in urban or rural contexts depend significantly on personal perceptions and experiences, which is why ethnography is, to a certain extent, advantageous for this research. Donnatella della Porta also considers qualitative interviews to be particularly suitable for research interests, “... when we wish to analyze the meaning individuals attribute to the external world and to their own participation in it, the construction of identity, and the development of emotions.” (della Porta, 2014, p. 230), which can be adapted to this research, as there is an interest in the interviewees’ perceptions of their personal political participation, as well as in the influence of social media on the political identity and emotions of the interviewees. The analysis of these components is made possible by a qualitative methodological approach.

Nevertheless, semi-structured qualitative interviews require an interview guide, as an ethnographic approach alone does not adequately address the research objectives. The approach must be theory-driven to a certain extent, as theoretical knowledge already exists in the fields under investigation (Kaiser, 2020). The interview guide was therefore also developed using a deductive approach. The three basic theoretical concepts served to divide the interview guide into three blocks of the same name, which in turn were subdivided into subcategories based on the

theoretical literature. This step served to systematise the interviews in order to ensure a rough structure that all interviews could follow equally. Within the subcategories, most of the questions were also derived deductively from the theoretical literature (see Appendix 1). Nevertheless, the interview guide had to remain flexible and adaptable to the research focus in order to address each interviewee individually (della Porta, 2014). Consequently, some questions were also generated inductively during the drafting of the guide or in the context of the respective interviews, to better adapt the guide to the individual situation of the interviewee, or to explore new questions that arose during the interview. The interview guide also remained flexible in that questions were omitted if they were deemed irrelevant in the respective situation, or had already been answered in another context.

The open-ended nature of the interviews, as well as the adaptability of the interview guide, implies that this research does not claim to be representative. Instead, it aims to critically examine and analyse individual cases. The research interest lies not in confirming a rule, but in understanding how young adults in urban and rural regions experience and use social media as interfaces for political participation within their specific local contexts. The individual cases are to be compared with one another in order to uncover similarities and points of friction, which in turn raise new questions and approaches. However, it is not assumed that these points of friction or similarities would occur in the same way in other cases. Rather, the research focus is to be expanded through points of friction that arise in the course of the research and to offer opportunities for further exploration.

Nor is the selection of interviewees or their number intended to be representative. As the qualitative interviews are designed to be fairly open-ended due to their ethnographic influence, and as the research question takes a highly exploratory approach by asking about participants' own experiences and perceptions, the interviews tend to be quite long and go into great depth. This also makes the analysis of the interviews very time-consuming, which in turn affects the feasibility in terms of the number of interviewees (della Porta, 2014). Consequently, quantity was not a priority when selecting the interviewees, and ultimately three interviews were conducted, each lasting between two and three hours. This number of interviewees was chosen to ensure feasibility in terms of coding and analysing the transcripts.

The three interviewees were selected on the basis of the following criteria. Young adults aged between their early twenties and early thirties were interviewed. Individuals were selected with whom access and contact already existed, to ensure feasibility in this regard as well (della Porta, 2014). A further criterion for the selection of individuals was that they were already politically active, including on social media. Consequently, individuals were selected who are members of

political parties and are politically active within them, and who were known to have already shared or posted political content on social media. The main criterion was that both urban and rural perspectives should be taken into account. To ensure this, a male participant from a town in Hesse was selected, who will be referred to as ‘D’ in the course of this study. The other two interviewees, a woman referred to as “L” and a man (“E”), live in a village in a rural region of Hesse. As the interviewees spoke in part about very private experiences and perceptions, they have been anonymised. The names of the places of residence have been omitted, or were not mentioned by the interviewees themselves, and letters were used instead of the names of the interviewees. The identity and exact place of residence of the participants are not relevant to the data analysis.

During the interviews, care was taken to ensure openness, so that all interviewees were able to raise topics themselves (Kaiser, 2020). A safe and familiar environment was also created. This is in line with the ethical standards which were, of course, adhered to during the interviews and in the processing and analysis of the data (Kaiser, 2020). At the start of all interviews, consent was obtained for the audio recording of the interviews. The interviews were subsequently anonymised to protect personal data. Furthermore, after explaining the research focus and methodology, informed consent was obtained from all interviewees. The principles of integrity and objectivity on the part of the interviewer were upheld (Kaiser, 2020).

Following each interview, a memory log was kept, incorporating initial impressions of the interviews (Kaiser, 2020). The interviews were then transcribed using the AI-supported, GDPR-compliant transcription software “f4” and subsequently cross-checked against the audio files to eliminate errors. The transcripts were then coded and the data analysed by using the “MAXQDA” programme.

A combination of both deductive and inductive approaches was adopted when coding the transcripts. Codes were derived partly from existing theoretical knowledge, as well as directly from the data generated in the interviews, some of which was not theory-based. This approach resulted in the creation of 80 codes (see Appendix 2). The analysis of the interview data was also carried out using the MAXQDA programme, whereby codes were selected and systematised, thereby enabling a comparison of the data. This revealed both similarities and differences in the data, showing the questions and topics on which the interviewees’ experiences and perceptions were particularly similar or divergent. It was also possible to identify data that did not correspond to preconceptions and therefore gave rise to points of confusion. The results of the analysis of the interview data are presented below.

Empirical Analysis of the Findings from the Interviews

Like the interviews themselves, the empirical analysis of the interviews is divided into three sections. First, findings on “digital political participation” will be presented. This will be followed by results from the section “Social Media as Interfaces for Political Participation”. Finally, data on the urban and rural contexts from the section “Urban-rural differences in infrastructure and opportunities for participation” will be presented and analysed based on the three interviews.

How do Young Adults Participate Online? – Forms of Digital Political Participation

The interview data confirms that social media has become indispensable for accessing politics, information and news, particularly among young adults, and is increasingly replacing other media. All three interviewees confirmed that they regularly turn to social media platforms to access political information (see Appendices E.1, p. 2; D.1, p. 2; L.1, p. 2). All interviewees also mention other media through which they obtain political information; however, the relevance of social media for accessing information is clearly emphasised by E, D and L. The views of all three interviewees are similar, particularly regarding their preferred and most frequently used social media platforms for accessing information and political participation. All name Instagram as the digital platform they primarily use, whether for leisure or for gathering information and political participation. The social media platforms not used by any of the interviewees, and explicitly mentioned by L and D as those perceived negatively and avoided, are TikTok and Facebook. (Appendix L.1, pp. 5-6; Appendix D.2, p. 13). A very negative atmosphere is associated with these platforms. WhatsApp, on the other hand, is used as a messaging service by all interviewees, primarily for communication and political networking. For example, E is politically networked in several WhatsApp groups (see Appendix E.2, p. 4). In their use of social media for accessing information and political engagement and participation, all interviewees are therefore very similar. But how exactly do they become politically active on social media? How do political networking and participation manifest themselves in each of their cases?

The three interviewees are all members of political parties and are therefore already involved in local politics through offline channels. But how does this manifest itself in their use of social media? For political participation in general, Instagram is used, for example, to create, share or forward political content. Political articles and the like are also forwarded via Instagram or WhatsApp, amongst other platforms, to make them accessible to others (see Appendix E.2, p. 1). Petitions are also mentioned as a digital activity through which one participates politically:

„... dass das dann irgendwo auch mal (.) eine Petition vorgestellt wird. Äh Da beteilige ich mich dann ja, wenn das, ja, wenn das Thema mich interessiert. Wenn mir das wichtig ist, dann beteilige ich mich auch da dran.“ (Appendix E.2, p. 3). However, only E and L, the interviewees from the rural context, regularly participate in petitions and consequently regard them as helpful and effective (see Appendix E.2, p. 7; Appendix L.3, p. 1). D, on the other hand, considers petitions to be rather ineffective and therefore hardly ever participates in them: „... Ich bin kein großer Fan von Petitionen. Nicht, weil ich die nicht, weil ich das nicht wertschätzen und die Arbeit dahinter nicht sehe. Aber ich, (..) da bin ich vielleicht auch wirklich zu resigniert schon, aber ich sehe da keinen. Ich sehe da keinen Sinn und Zweck drin. (.) Ich sehe da nicht, dass es irgendwas bringt.“ (Appendix D.2, p. 11). Furthermore, all three interviewees also participate politically on digital platforms as part of their voluntary work in political parties and initiatives, clubs or associations. E, for instance, explains that he uses social media to draw attention to his party's campaign issues. He is also a member of an initiative against right-wing extremism, which he has previously promoted on social media, for example by advertising the initiative's events (see Appendices E.4, p. 13; E.1, p. 3). L and D also use social media to draw attention to their parties' issues online. In L's case, this means that content is created according to a concept and clearly pursues the aim of reaching more people (see Appendix L.2, p. 2). D is also involved in party politics online. For example, he writes texts for social media posts (see Appendix D.1, p. 4 and following). The role of social media in political participation and access to information proved to be of great importance to every respondent. All stated that social media platforms had become indispensable to them, particularly for accessing political information (see Appendices D.2, p. 1; E.2, p. 1; L.2, p. 1).

Differences became apparent in the perception of the impact of personal online participation, as well as its influence on politics. E and L take a more optimistic view of the potential impact of their personal online participation (see Appendices E.3, p. 3; L.3, p. 3; L.2, p. 7), whilst D is rather sceptical about the ability of digital participation to influence politics: „Ja, sie können was bewirken. (..) Meistens tun sie es eher nicht, was sie aber (.) muss ich dazusagen. Meistens tun sie es nicht direkt, aber was natürlich immer passiert, ist, dass halt Debatten stattfinden.“ (Appendix D.2, p. 12). Nevertheless, he sees the opportunity to stimulate important political debates via social media.

Personal Perception of Interface Processes through Access and Restriction in Digital Networking

How do the three interviewees perceive social media as interfaces in their personal use of these platforms for political participation and access to information? How do they experience networking, the facilitation of communication and participation, but also limitations and negative aspects? Key findings from the interview sections on social media as interfaces for political participation are outlined below.

All those interviewed emphasise the importance of social media platforms for political networking with others. WhatsApp is mentioned first and foremost, as a significant part of the organisation and planning of parties, groups and initiatives takes place via this messaging service: „Und das Ganze hat sich dann halt (.) ja in einer WhatsApp Gruppe (.) organisiert und darüber ist halt viel, viel abgesprochen worden, Termine für Treffen ausgemacht worden“ (Appendix E.2, p.4). For D, too, internal party networking takes place mainly via messaging services, although he explicitly mentions that no political networking at all takes place via social media platforms such as Instagram (see Appendix D.2, p. 3). The interview with L differs in that she considers networking on social media, which goes beyond communication and organisation via messaging services, to be particularly crucial. She explains that a key aspect of generating reach involves being connected with other local branches of her party and mutually liking and commenting on posts to support one another. Furthermore, contact with other local and district branches is maintained via Instagram (see Appendix L.2, pp. 2, 4).

However, when comparing the codes “Advantages of online networking and participation” and “Disadvantages of online networking and participation”, the analysis of the data reveals that aspects associated with online participation which are perceived as negative predominate and therefore appear to be a central issue for all interviewees. The primary advantage cited is the low barrier to entry for participation and access to information (see Appendices L.3, pp. 1-2; E.3, p. 4). In particular, L and E mention that the barriers to engaging with and participating in politics are very low on social media. Furthermore, good opportunities to engage in political debates (see Appendix E.3, p. 2) or even to initiate political debates, as well as the promotion of opinion-forming (see Appendix D.3, p. 2), are regarded as advantages of networking and participation via social media. All interviewees also agree that networking can be greatly accelerated through social media, which naturally reduces the effort involved and enables rapid mobilisation and organisation (see Appendices D.2, p. 7; E.3, p. 2; L.3, pp. 1-2; L.2, pp. 4-6).

The disadvantages of political networking and participation mentioned in the interviews vary widely and relate to many different aspects. Furthermore, they outnumber the coded advantages

identified in the interviews. E, for example, finds networking via social media very impersonal and also sees the communication process as more difficult, as misunderstandings can arise quickly (see Appendices E.2, p. 5; E.4, p. 15). Networking is therefore not necessarily perceived as simplified here, but rather as complicated. Furthermore, the data from the interviews with D and L show that the polarisation of society is also associated with social media. Both identify as a problem the fact that people on social media often operate within a bubble that merely confirms their own political views (see Appendix D.2, p. 3). Other content is then hardly displayed at all, but only that which corresponds to one's own interests. L cites algorithms that are geared towards users' personal preferences as the reason for this: „... sondern jeder ist des Algorithmus wegen halt in seiner (.) Bubble, in seiner Blase, von der man immer spricht und man zieht sich dann nur die Informationen, die man (.) die man selber auch braucht für das was man denkt.“ (Appendix L.2, p. 3). This goes hand in hand with the fact that disinformation and half-truths become a danger, as E mentions in his interview. He sees it as problematic that people with vastly differing levels of information can all express their opinions online, which can also give rise to disinformation. He therefore emphasises how important it is to also seek information through other channels (see Appendix E.3, pp. 4, 6).

All interviewees perceive the existing hierarchy in political participation on social media as particularly problematic, which is also seen as a constraint on personal political participation. The visibility of one's own political content depends largely on the number of followers (see Appendix E.3, p. 3). In his interview, D criticises the fact that on social media, one cannot compete with the power and reach of the major media houses, which have far greater resources and can expand their networks more easily. Through this power, they steer the political discourse (see Appendix D.3, p. 1). L also explains in her interview that it is, of course, difficult as an individual to compete with large, high-reach accounts, such as those of politicians or public institutions, which have different resources and capabilities at their disposal. L contrasts this with the fact that access is, in principle, very low-threshold for everyone (see Appendix L.3, p. 2). However, when asked specifically whether the interviewees had ever felt restricted in the dissemination of political content or in political networking, in other words, whether they had personally experienced restrictions through interface processes, all of them answered in the negative (see Appendices E.3, p. 9; D.3, p. 17; L.3, p. 11).

Further interesting insights emerged from the codes relating to the influence of social media, as interfaces, on personal political identity and the perception of politics in everyday life. All interviewees agreed that social media did not create their political identity: „Die formen ganz stark meine politische Identität über die Inhalte, (.) die (.) erzeugen die politische Identität aber

nicht. Also es muss immer schon eine Grundtendenz da sein in einem, (.) damit das dann weiter vertieft werden kann.“ (Appendix D.2, pp. 13-14). E and L make similar arguments. E, for instance, views social media primarily as platforms through which he explores areas of interest in greater depth, whereas political identity is largely influenced by other factors (see Appendix E.3, p. 14). L also sees social media more as an amplifier of her political interests, but also sees it as the trigger for her motivation to participate herself: „... *ich glaube schon, (.) dass die Informationen, die ich dadurch bekommen habe, mich noch mehr motiviert haben, wirklich aktiv zu werden und quasi (..) ähm ja so herauszutreten aus dem stillen Konsumieren und Meinungsdenken, sondern wirklich aktiv zu sein. Glaube ich schon.*“ (Appendix L.2, p. 9). The three interviewees see their political awareness and identity, as well as the triggers for political engagement, as being significantly shaped by other factors, such as their family and social environment, school, clubs, hobbies and also their place of residence (see Appendices D.2, p. 14; L.3, pp. 13-14). For example, E also became politically engaged through his father’s voluntary work on the local council in his place of residence. Access to participation arose through the family, as politics and participation were frequently discussed at home (see Appendix E.3, p. 12).

Social media are therefore perceived by the respondents as interfaces that support the formation of their own opinions rather than fundamentally shaping their political identity in these cases. As the interview data shows, identity formation and personal political engagement depend more heavily on place of residence in this context. But how are social media perceived in this local context? How do the three interviewees use social media in rural or urban contexts to network politically and gain access to politics?

Political Participation in Urban and Rural Contexts – How Relevant are Social Media for Local Political Participation?

The data emerging from the respective interview sections on political participation in urban or rural settings revealed some interesting findings during the coding process.

E and L both live in a small municipality in Hesse, in villages each with fewer than 1,000 inhabitants. D lives in a town in Hesse with a population of approximately 70,000. The range of local political options varies accordingly. In E and L’s municipality, the SPD, the CDU, the “Freie Wähler” and the Green Party are represented as political parties. There is also a local initiative against right-wing extremism and NABU as an NGO. E is a member of the local CDU

branch and of the initiative against right-wing extremism. L is a member of the local Green Party branch in her place of residence.

D describes the town where he lives as „*tiefschwarz, politisch und erzkonservativ. (.) Die Kirche hat hier hohes hohes Sagen bzw prägt, prägt das (.) sogenannte Stadtbild, (.) prägt ganz viel, (.) ist ganz viel verbandelt mit der Politik und mit Vereinen und Initiativen etc..*“ (Appendix D.4, p. 1). That said, he also speaks of a wide range of political opportunities, be it through associations, initiatives or political parties. Furthermore, he notes that the town is shaped by the local university and its students. D also studies at this university and moved there for his studies (see Appendix D.4, p. 1). Furthermore, he is a member of Die Linke in his place of residence and participates at the university as a member of the student parliament (see Appendices D.1, pp. 3-4; D.2, p. 2). All interview participants are thus politically active in their place of residence. But what role do social media play as interfaces in these local contexts? To explore this question, codes were derived relating to access to local forms of participation, political networking in the place of residence, the perception of the visibility of local political issues, and the perceived relevance of social media and analogue political formats in the place of residence for political participation. The analysis of the data using these codes yielded some surprising insights.

Local political networking shows some overlaps between the three individuals. However, when the data is compared, differences also become apparent. All interviewees cite offline forms of political networking as the means through which a large part of local organisation and networking still takes place (see Appendices D.4, p. 7; E.4, p. 2; L.4, pp. 11-12). However, the extent of this offline political networking varies. D repeatedly refers to networking with local people via groups on WhatsApp or Telegram and also mentions the Left's presence on Instagram, through which new members are recruited (see Appendix D.4, pp. 5-6). Networking in digital formats also played an important role in his own approach to political engagement within the Left. E and L, on the other hand, say little about social media in relation to local political networking. They even state very clearly that networking generally takes place through face-to-face conversations and meetings (see Appendices L.1, p. 4; L.4, pp. 11-12; E.4, p. 1). L cites as one of the reasons for this the fact that many older people are also politically active locally in their community and can be better integrated into networking and organisation through personal contact (see Appendix L.4, pp. 11-12). Networking through face-to-face formats in direct meetings and personal conversations is therefore intended to take demographic change into account in a rural context and addresses the fact that in small communities, fewer young people and significantly more older people participate in politics.

In a rural context, the code ‘Access to spaces for political networking’ revealed in the data that the local council provides rooms free of charge for political purposes, thereby facilitating local networking and participation: *„Ja, also ganz glücklicherweise ist es bei uns so, dass (.) also Räume der Gemeinde für demokratische politische Zwecke (.) kostenfrei zu nutzen sind. Also man kann die buchen und kann sich da quasi treffen. Das ist schon ein ganz, ganz großer Vorteil, eben weil die (.) Kneipenlandschaft, sag ich jetzt mal Restaurant, Gaststättenlandschaft abebbt ...“* (Appendix L.4, p. 7). E also confirms these spatial opportunities (see Appendix E.4, pp. 6-7). Here, for the first time in the data analysis, striking contrasts between the urban and rural situations become apparent. When asked about opportunities for networking in his town, D replied that Die Linke does not have its own office there and that it is generally difficult to find premises, as they are not neutral as a party and are therefore not accepted in many places. He is not aware of the city providing spaces for meetings to parties and political groups, nor does he assume this is the case (see D.4, pp. 14-15). In this regard, he again emphasises the importance of social media for networking and organising, on which his party is then also heavily reliant. This finding from the data caused some confusion during the analysis, as one would not necessarily expect premises to be made available for political purposes relatively freely and free of charge, given the otherwise limited political provision in rural regions and a frequent lack of funding for political projects. Equally surprising is that in this specific town, with a wide range of facilities and many public buildings, no space is made available to a political party, which consequently often has no choice but to rely on digital networking. One reason why access to premises appears easier in rural areas could also lie in the well-established and very stable social networks that have developed there, as is also evident in the general access to political participation in a rural context.

Similar patterns emerge regarding access to participation as with local networking. L and E describe how their involvement in local politics through political parties and initiatives today stemmed explicitly from personal contacts and face-to-face meetings. L describes how, although another member of the Green Party from her village contacted her by email, a face-to-face meeting was immediately organised at a local pub with other new members of the Greens from L’s community to build connections. This then gave rise to the idea of founding a local branch (see Appendix L.1, p. 4). For E, too, the initial contact was personal and rather informal: *„Da wurde ich äh tatsächlich von zwei Leuten angesprochen, ob ich mir vorstellen könnte, da (.) da mitzuarbeiten und da auch so eine so eine Kundgebung mit zu organisieren. Ob ich da vielleicht auch (.) selbst was sprechen sprechen würde.“* (Appendix E.2, p.4). The situation was similar with regard to his local involvement in the CDU and the local council, where his

involvement arose largely through his family and other social contacts who were already active there (see Appendix E.4, p. 7). In D's case, contact with the Left in his town arose through him approaching the party, following which he was admitted to the Telegram group (see Appendix D.4, p. 6). The most notable difference in the data regarding access to personal political participation in the place of residence is that neither E nor L had to approach people themselves and ask how they could participate there. Rather, they were approached because they were, in some cases, already connected to the relevant people. Access in these two cases was therefore so low-threshold that they did not even have to actively seek it out themselves. D, on the other hand, was forced to actively approach members of Die Linke and thus actively seek access. This highlights how crucial the existing local social network appears to be in a rural context for enabling participation. For those who are part of this social network, access to participation is very low-threshold. In urban regions, however, often only a few people have such a large social network that would guarantee such low-threshold access.

This now leads to a final aspect to be considered in the local context: the perceived relevance of social media for political participation in one's place of residence. All interviewees regard social media as particularly important at a local level for achieving visibility for certain political issues (see Appendices E.4, p. 11; D.4, pp. 5-6, 7; L.4, p. 11). Nevertheless, even with this code, the weighting of the data shows that D, in an urban context, emphasises even more frequently and strongly how important digital networking and participation are in his city (see Appendix D.4, pp. 5-6, 20-21), whereas E and L both state that a mix of both forms of participation is crucial: *„Ich glaube schon, dass sie wichtig sind, um um alle mit ins Boot holen zu können und um alle, möglichst alle zu informieren über Generationen hinweg, weil eben (.) ein Teil Informationen primär über Social Media und Internet holt und ein anderer Teil noch auf auf klassischem Wege. Auf analogem Wege vielleicht. (.) Und ja, ich glaube, dass beides wichtig ist.“* (see Appendix L.3, p. 12), *„Gut, (..) es passiert auch offline. Ich denke mal, die Mischung ist da relativ wichtig, um (.) ja, ich sage mal so alle (.) alle auch mitnehmen zu können.“* (see Appendix E.4, p. 13). An interesting insight here is that both L and E have intergenerational justice in mind and therefore, for them, analogue forms of participation and networking remain a central pillar of local political participation. This is not evident from D's data.

E and L also highlight the benefits of local, offline forms of participation. Whilst they view social media as a means to an end, primarily as a medium for information and networking (see Appendix E.4, p. 16; L.4, p. 11), they perceive the work of the association as a place for networking and personal contact, and the social interaction during meetings for participatory purposes as something very positive; furthermore, locally, they experience this as something very

active and intense, which also connects generations. Social interaction within the process of participation is strongly emphasised (see Appendices L.4, pp. 11-12; E.4, p. 15). E also perceives social media in his community as less relevant than in urban regions and gives the following reason for this: *„Ich (..) glaube, dass hier einfach offline noch viel mehr stattfindet und offline eine viel größere Sichtbarkeit da ist als in der Stadt. Und dass ich das deswegen so ein bisschen so ein bisschen ausgleicht, weil ich glaube, in der Stadt (.) wird man heute ohne (.) Social Media (..) keinen mehr oder ganz wenige Leute noch erreichen.“* (see Appendix E.4, p. 14). He therefore views social media less as a necessity for political participation and more as a supplement to enhance certain aspects of participation and networking.

Discussion and Conclusion

The data from the interviews clearly show how ambivalently social media, as interfaces for participation, are perceived and used by young adults from rural and urban regions in Germany. The interviews partly confirm theoretical assumptions, but in other respects raise new questions and trigger moments of confusion in which the assumptions appear not to be confirmed at all, which in turn leads to new hypotheses. One interesting finding emerging from the data analysis is that, whilst social media have become almost indispensable as political interfaces in the lives of young people, this is not entirely the case, as all interviewees referred to social media primarily as information media and platforms for networking, rather than as actual political activities intended to achieve visibility there or to influence politics and society. It is also striking that all interviewees emphasised the negative aspects of social media as interfaces more strongly than the advantages of networking and access to information. It was even mentioned that communication is sometimes complicated, as the reduced complexity also leads to more frequent misunderstandings. However, this does not correspond at all to the theoretical assumption that interface processes act as tools for simplifying communication. Social media is therefore subject to critical scrutiny and is used in a supportive capacity where the benefits of these platforms are perceived as helpful. The negative characteristics of social media in terms of communication and its use for political purposes are often disregarded in personal use and replaced by other media.

The most surprising findings from the interviews, however, primarily emerge from the comparison of the urban and rural contexts regarding the use and perception of social media as interfaces for political participation. It is certainly interesting, amongst other things, that the theory regarding the perception of political efficacy (Rowland et al., 2024) is actually confirmed in the

three cases of the respondents. E and L both assume that political participation via social media can indeed have an impact, and both regularly take part in petitions, whilst D is rather sceptical about the whole thing. One reason for this could be that L and E also see the effects of participation more frequently in their everyday lives within the community, as the size of their municipality allows them to experience politics and the effectiveness of political participation more closely, whereas such processes are often harder to track in cities.

Another major point of confusion when analysing the interview data concerned local access to political participation and spaces for political networking. The initial assumption was that, given the limited political provision in rural areas, access to spaces for political networking might also be more complicated there, as there are sometimes fewer venues available for this purpose. However, the opposite is the case. Although D reports a wide range of political opportunities in his town, there appears to be no real local support for political participation and networking, which is why the barriers are relatively high. In the rural context described in the interviews, the situation is different, as spaces are made available free of charge for political use. Consequently, greater efforts are perceived to be made to facilitate participation at a local level. Social networks in rural areas could play a role in this.

As the data from the interviews with L and E show, socially developed networks still have enormous social and political relevance in rural regions of Germany today. Social networks and acquaintances, as well as family, played a decisive role for both in their access to local political participation. Due to existing contacts, access proved to be low-threshold. Indeed, neither of them even had to seek it out themselves, but were actively approached and asked if they would like to get involved. In the urban context of D, such low-threshold access did not exist. In the course of this, a very interesting aspect of participation in rural areas becomes apparent. Social interaction remains highly relevant there today, not only for society but also for politics, particularly in terms of the interaction between people of different generations. The fact that it is very important for older generations to be included in the political process, and that offline forms of participation are therefore also very important, is explicitly mentioned only by E and L from the rural context, whereas D does not mention this. Political participation in rural regions of Germany could therefore rely much more heavily on the engagement of older generations, as a result of demographic change. Social interaction, of which political participation is one aspect, still pervades and shapes society there as a defining concept. This has an impact on political participation, which still takes place very largely in offline formats. The relevance of social media is therefore viewed as particularly ambivalent in rural areas.

Social media represents an important source of political information and opportunities there, if only because local provision is more limited. Furthermore, social media offers groups from rural areas a platform for visibility on political issues that might otherwise be difficult to achieve. However, social media is not regarded as an absolute necessity as an interface for political participation. It can positively reinforce various aspects, but does not replace the effectiveness of social interaction and networking in forms of political participation that take place there on a personal basis.

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