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Performing the Self – How Authentic Instagram Images of Politicians Shape Perceptions of Warmth, Trust and Voting Intention

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Abstract

This thesis examines how visual displays of political authenticity on Instagram influence voters' perceptions of candidate warmth and trustworthiness, as well as their voting intentions. Based on a relational and performative understanding of authenticity, the study explores how image-based cues that prime intimacy, immediacy, and ordinariness shape emotional and attitudinal responses in a personalized, media-saturated political environment.

In an online survey with 110 German participants, these effects were tested using synthetic Instagram posts from a fictional politician. Participants were randomly assigned to either a control group featuring formal political communication or one of two experimental groups containing targeted cues of authenticity. Perceived authenticity was measured using a multidimensional scale while affective warmth, political trust, and voting intention were measured as dependent variables.

The results show that posts signaling intimacy and immediacy significantly increased perceptions of warmth and trust. However, cues signaling ordinariness did not yield statistically significant effects. Neither treatment condition significantly influenced voting intention, suggesting that, although authenticity shapes emotional evaluations, its impact on voting intentions may be more limited. Contrary to expectations from motivated reasoning theory, treatment effects did not vary significantly by ideological orientation or political awareness, lending greater support to models of parallel updating.

This study contributes to research on political personalization, digital campaigning, and cognitive decision-making heuristics. It demonstrates that even brief, image-based cues conveying authenticity – especially through intimacy and immediacy – can measurably influence political judgments. This effect occurs across ideological boundaries and regardless of individuals' levels of political awareness. In an era of institutional distrust and media-saturated politics, authenticity thus emerges as a strategically deployable resource for democratic representation – even if it does not automatically translate into actual voting behavior.

Keywords

political authenticity, instagram, social media, political personalization, political communication, voting intention, political trust, warmth perception, parallel updating, motivated reasoning

Zusammenfassung

Diese Masterarbeit untersucht, wie visuelle Darstellungen politischer Authentizität auf Instagram die Wahrnehmung von Wärme und Vertrauen sowie die Wahlabsicht gegenüber politischen Kandidatinnen und Kandidaten beeinflussen. Ausgehend von einem relationalen und performativen Verständnis von Authentizität untersucht die Studie, welche emotionalen und einstellungsbezogenen Reaktionen bildbasierte Hinweise auf Intimität, Unmittelbarkeit und Alltäglichkeit in einem personalisierten und mediengeprägten politischen Umfeld hervorrufen.

In einer Online-Umfrage mit 110 Teilnehmenden aus Deutschland wurden diese Effekte anhand synthetisch erzeugter Instagram-Beiträge eines fiktiven Politikers getestet. Die Befragten wurden per Zufallszuweisung entweder der Kontrollgruppe mit formeller politischer Kommunikation oder einer von zwei Versuchsgruppen mit gezielten Authentizitätshinweisen zugeordnet. Die wahrgenommene Authentizität wurde mithilfe einer multidimensionalen Skala gemessen, während die abhängigen Variablen affektive Wärme, politisches Vertrauen und Wahlabsicht umfassten.

Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass Beiträge, die Intimität und Unmittelbarkeit signalisierten, die Wahrnehmung von Wärme und Vertrauen signifikant steigerten. Hinweise auf Alltäglichkeit zeigten hingegen keinen signifikanten Effekt. Auch die Wahlabsicht wurde durch keine der Behandlungsbedingungen signifikant beeinflusst, was darauf hindeutet, dass Authentizität zwar emotionale Bewertungen verändert, jedoch nicht automatisch zu verändertem Wahlverhalten führt. Entgegen den Erwartungen der Theorie des „Motivated Reasoning“ variierte die Wirkung der Authentizitätshinweise nicht signifikant in Abhängigkeit von der ideologischen Orientierung oder dem politischen Bewusstsein, was somit eher für das Modell des „Parallel Updating“ spricht.

Die Studie liefert neue Erkenntnisse zur politischen Personalisierung, digitalen Wahlkampfführung und zu kognitiven Entscheidungsprozessen. Sie zeigt, dass schon kurze visuelle Eindrücke auf Instagram – vor allem solche, die Nähe und Spontaneität vermitteln – politische Bewertungen beeinflussen können, und das unabhängig von Ideologie oder politischem Vorwissen. Damit erscheint Authentizität in einer Zeit des institutionellen Misstrauens und der mediatisierten Politik als strategisch nutzbare Ressource – wenn auch ohne direkten Einfluss auf das Wahlverhalten.

Schlagwörter

Politische Authentizität, Instagram, Soziale Medien, Politische Personalisierung, Politische Kommunikation, Wahlabsicht, Politisches Vertrauen, Wahrnehmung von Wärme, Parallel Updating, Motivated Reasoning

Introduction

Currywurst and beer, oversized cigars, and a loyal comrade with deep ties to political power – this was the image that many Germans associated with former chancellor Gerhard Schröder. While his policies did not appeal to every voter, Schröder captivated the public with an unmistakably real political persona: down-to-earth, emotionally expressive, and relatable. His casual appearances at Hannover 96 soccer matches, relaxed public demeanor, and unpolished rhetoric projected a quality rare in high-level politics: authenticity.

This resonance with voters is not merely anecdotal; it signals a broader, more fundamental shift in the criteria used to evaluate political leadership. In an era marked by declining trust in institutions (Kuran, 2016; Rosanvallon & Goldhammer, 2008) and rising skepticism toward political elites (Allen et al., 2018), traditional measures such as competence – understood as policy expertise and administrative effectiveness – and integrity – associated with moral consistency – are no longer sufficient foundations for political judgment (Brown et al., 1998; Garzia, 2011; Pancer et al., 1999). Increasingly, citizens seek leaders who appear emotionally accessible, expressive, and relatable (Whittle et al., 2021), departing from Weber's (1947/2009) ideal of the rational, detached authority.

This study argues that authenticity has become an important and emotionally powerful aspect of how people judge political leaders – on par with, yet qualitatively distinct from, traits such as competence and integrity. Unlike these stable, measurable qualities, authenticity is a socially constructed, mediated perception (Carroll, 2015; Enli, 2015; Peterson, 2005). It is not an intrinsic personal quality but rather a relational judgment shaped by political communication and media performance and filtered through voters' identities, ideologies, and emotional dispositions (Carroll, 2015; Enli, 2015; Fordahl, 2018; O'Connor et al., 2017; Shane, 2018). In other words, authenticity is not a quality that politicians inherently possess, but rather, it is something they must perform convincingly, and audiences must be willing to believe.

Despite its growing relevance, the study of political authenticity remains conceptually fragmented and empirically underdeveloped. Existing research tends to focus on elite case studies – particularly in the context of presidential campaigns – and relies on qualitative approaches or correlational data (Becker, 2018; Enli, 2017; Hahl et al., 2018). Consequently, there is a notable lack of experimental research identifying the causal mechanisms through which perceptions of authenticity form and influence political attitudes and behaviors. While it is known that partisanship influences judgments of authenticity (Brewer et al., 2014; Stiers et al., 2021), the broader role of ideological predispositions remains understudied.

To address this gap, the study poses two central research questions:

(RQ1) To what extent does perceived authenticity influence voters' evaluations of a politician's warmth, trustworthiness, and voting intention?

(RQ2) How do individual-level political predispositions – specifically, ideological orientation and political awareness – moderate the relationship between perceived authenticity and these evaluative outcomes?

To investigate these research questions, I conducted an online survey experiment with 110 participants in Germany. The experiment used simulated Instagram posts to activate three empirically grounded dimensions of authenticity: immediacy, emotional intimacy, and ordinariness (Luebke, 2021; Luebke & Engelmann, 2022). Perceived authenticity was measured using a multidimensional, multi-item scale based on Luebke and Engelmann's (2022) validated framework. This scale allowed for a more rigorous and theory-informed operationalization of a concept that is often referenced in political discussions but rarely quantified with methodological rigor. The treatments were integrated into broader models of political evaluation to assess the influence of authenticity on perceptions of candidate warmth and trust and on participants' voting intentions. Additionally, the study examined how these effects vary according to respondents' ideological orientation and political awareness. In doing so, the study contributes to research on political communication, persuasion, public opinion, and electoral behavior.

First, the study contributes to the field of political communication by conceptualizing authenticity as a performative construct shaped by media environments. Through the use of fictitious Instagram posts, the study demonstrates how political actors can use strategic cues, such as spontaneity, ordinariness, and emotional intimacy, to create the perception of closeness with their audience. Social media platforms amplify these performances, turning authenticity into a communicative norm that is constantly "promised, demanded, and contested" (Shane, 2018, p. 3) while simultaneously blurring the boundaries between the public and private spheres (Dumitrica, 2014; Manning et al., 2017).

Second, the study contributes to the literature on political persuasion by theorizing authenticity as an affective heuristic. In an era of information overload and waning partisan loyalty, voters increasingly rely on emotional cues, such as sincerity and relatability, to evaluate political figures (Jones, 2016; Stiers et al., 2021). Thus, authenticity functions as a cognitive shortcut that substitutes for ideological or policy-based judgments, particularly among less informed or politically disengaged voters (King, 2002).

Third, the study deepens our understanding of electoral behavior by showing how authenticity cues shape candidate evaluations. As a form of character-driven politics (Parry-Giles, 2001),

authenticity helps explain the appeal of populist figures who perform emotional sincerity and ordinariness (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018), and it may also help restore trust among politically disenchanted or skeptical segments of the electorate (Dalton, 2004; Mauk, 2020; Valgarðsson et al., 2024).

Finally, this study conceptualizes authenticity not as a fixed personal trait, but as a dynamic perception shaped by communication practices and filtered through voters' predispositions. By experimentally isolating the key performative dimensions of authenticity, the study provides a more nuanced and empirically grounded framework for understanding how authenticity operates in today's image-saturated and emotionally charged political landscape.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows: The next section contextualizes the study within two major political trends: the growing personalization of politics and the decline of traditional party loyalties. This is followed by a theoretical framework that defines authenticity as a socially constructed, media-shaped perception. Subsequent sections describe the survey experiment design, examine how different authenticity cues affect perceptions of warmth, trust, and voting intention, and explore how these effects vary based on participants' political predispositions. Finally, the paper concludes with a discussion of the broader theoretical and practical implications of the findings, an examination of the study's limitations, and reflections on what the results reveal about how voters evaluate candidates and how democratic representation functions in today's media-driven, politically disillusioned environment.

Personalization and the Media Logic of Modern Leadership

Over the past two decades, political personalization has become a central focus of scholarly inquiry, reflecting its growing influence on contemporary democratic politics (Caprara & Zimbardo, 2004; Karvonen, 2014; McAllister, 2007; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007).

Rather than being a singular phenomenon, personalization is best understood as a multidimensional process spanning voter behavior, political strategy, and media representation. It marks a shift in which voters increasingly evaluate candidates based on personal attributes rather than ideological commitments; politicians present themselves as individual actors rather than party emissaries; parties center campaign narratives around their leaders; and the media portray elections as contests between personalities rather than programs (Karvonen, 2014; Rahat & Sheaffer, 2007).

As Rahat and Sheaffer (2007, p. 65) point out, personalization is “a process in which the political weight of the individual actor in the political process increases over time while the centrality of the political group declines.” This trend mirrors broader sociocultural shifts toward individualization (Bauman, 2001/2013), wherein citizens engage with politics as emotionally

motivated individuals rather than as members of enduring social groups. However, the rise of personalization cannot be explained by cultural change alone. Structural transformations – notably the breakdown of class, religion, and ideological divisions (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Franklin et al., 1992/2024; McAllister, 2007) – and changes in political communication have also played critical roles.

Television marked a turning point in the way personal image began to influence politics. As Mughan (2000, p. 129) notes, the visual and emotional logic of television encouraged political parties to emphasize leaders over political platforms. The rise of televised leaders' debates, which originated in U.S. presidential elections and had been adopted by most democracies by the 1990s (Farrell et al., 1996), solidified the global shift toward leader-centered political spectacles.

Social media has further intensified these dynamics. Political figures now bypass traditional gatekeepers to curate their public images and engage audiences with performances of unfiltered intimacy. These impressions are often cultivated through unscripted behaviors, personal narratives, informal speech, and symbolic associations with ordinary life. This allows voters to feel that they “know” the politician not just as a public figure, but also as a relatable individual (Baym, 2010; Horton & Wohl, 1956). This sense of familiarity humanizes political actors and reduces the perceived distance between the elite and citizens (Enli, 2015; Metz et al., 2020).

At the same time, the decline of traditional voter loyalty has weakened the structure of traditional party systems. Mass membership organizations, such as trade unions and churches – once key intermediaries between citizens and parties – have declined, leaving parties increasingly detached from stable social bases (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002; Franklin et al., 1992/2024). Rather than renewing their core beliefs, many parties have chosen to reinvent themselves strategically. Echoing Kirchheimer's (1966) concept of the “catch-all party,” these parties have broadened their appeal by expanding beyond their traditional social class and focusing on features that attract voters, such as the personality of the party leader (Farrell et al., 1996).

These shifts have fundamentally changed how public opinion is shaped and influenced. Katz and Lazarsfeld's (1955) two-step flow model, in which intermediaries filtered political communication, has been replaced by a system in which political elites produce and amplify meaning directly. Social media activity by politicians shapes political knowledge (Bode, 2016), media consumption (Messing & Westwood, 2014), and voting behavior (Bond et al., 2012). Engagement metrics, such as likes, shares, and comments, further reinforce the centrality of individual leaders (Choi, 2015; Wu et al., 2011).

However, the same media-driven forces that increase the visibility of political leaders have also fueled the rise of populism. In this environment, populist leaders act as charismatic figures who form strong emotional bonds with their followers, creating tightly connected communities. As people increasingly engage in ideological echo chambers – spaces that reinforce their views and block out opposing perspectives (Dandekar et al., 2013; Isenberg, 1986) – emotional attachment to leaders often takes priority over careful, rational evaluation. This development deepens political polarization and weakens the shared understanding of facts and reality on which democratic debate depends (Betz, 1994; Lipset, 1960).

Institutional Constraints and Cross-National Variation in Political Personalization: Germany as a Hybrid Case

Although the personalization of politics is widely recognized as a defining feature of contemporary democracies, it manifests differently across institutional and cultural contexts. As Karvonen (2014) and Kriesi (2011) argue, there is little evidence of a universal shift toward leader-centered politics; rather, national political structures and traditions continue to exert significant influence over the practical application of personalization.

Presidential systems, such as those in the United States, Brazil, and the Philippines, offer archetypal examples of institutionalized personalization. Direct executive elections, weak party discipline, and highly commercialized media environments encourage leader-focused campaigning and communication (McAllister, 2007; Plasser, 2002; Plasser & Lengauer, 2010). In these contexts, the political leader becomes the main connection between the state and society, and personal appeal often replaces or even eclipses partisan identification.

By contrast, the institutional architecture of Western European parliamentary democracies tends to prevent the emergence of dominant political figures. Proportional representation, robust party systems, and traditions of coalition government foster a party-centered mode of engagement (Dalton et al., 2000). Within this broader typology, Germany stands out as an instructive case. Despite its institutional design strongly favoring party-centric politics, selective openness to personalization has nevertheless emerged (Blumenberg & Blumenberg, 2018; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Reinemann & Wilke, 2007).

Institutionally and culturally, Germany remains resistant to leader-centered politics. Its mixed-member proportional electoral system reflects a strong commitment to collective representation: by granting voters two votes – one for a constituency candidate and one for a party list – electoral outcomes are structurally linked to party performance, particularly through the decisive second vote (Esser et al., 2000; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014; Schmitt-Beck, 2004). This institutional logic

is reinforced by a political culture that values policy competence, institutional stability, and collective responsibility over emotional expressiveness or charismatic leadership (Holtz-Bacha, 2004; Schmitt-Beck, 2004). In this context, a leader's personal traits only become politically significant when they demonstrate support for established institutions and norms, rather than simply appearing emotionally appealing or attention-seeking (Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014).

Yet, despite the party-centered nature of the system, individual leaders can at times exert significant influence. Empirical evidence from German federal elections suggests that candidates such as Winfried Kretschmann (Green Party, Baden-Württemberg) and Malu Dreyer (SPD, Rhineland-Palatinate) have successfully leveraged personal traits such as warmth and competence to increase their popularity (Blumenberg & Blumenberg, 2018). Similarly, at the federal level, Angela Merkel's 2009 reelection campaign illustrates how, under specific conditions, a leader's personal image can temporarily overshadow party visibility – a phenomenon that Holtz-Bacha et al. (2014, p. 161) describe as a "chancellor bonus." However, such instances remain episodic and are shaped more by short-term campaign dynamics, media framing, and candidate-specific factors than by any structural shift toward leader-centered politics (Reinemann & Wilke, 2007; Schulz & Zeh, 2005).

In sum, Germany is a useful example for studying how political personalization functions within strong institutional constraints. Its hybrid character – a robust party system that incorporates leader-centered dynamics without abandoning party dominance – underscores the importance of institutional and cultural contexts in determining when and to what extent political leaders become the focal point of electoral communication.

The Political Significance of Personal Traits

The personal characteristics of political leaders have long played a central role in electoral decision-making. Even in party-centered systems, where policy agendas and ideological platforms are presumed to dominate, voters often evaluate candidates based on their character. As Funk (1996, p. 98) notes, "Traits are a basic component of our images of other persons of all kinds, whether family member, acquaintance, or public figure." In politics, a leader's character plays two important roles: it promotes policies and puts a human face on the often abstract goals of institutions. This makes complicated issues easier to understand and more relatable emotionally (Bass, 1981; Funk, 1996).

From a psychological standpoint, relying on character-based heuristics is both rational and efficient. Traits are understood as enduring patterns of thought, emotion, and behavior that are relatively stable over time, vary across individuals, and offer predictive power for future behavior (Kassin, 2004; Matthews et al., 2003). In ambiguous and complex institutional environments, voters

often use perceived traits as proxies for unobservable behavior, seeking leaders they trust to act ethically, even when unsupervised (McCurley & Mondak, 1995).

Although a wide range of traits may influence how voters perceive leaders – early studies identified more than 40 traits associated with effective leadership – empirical research has shown that these perceptions often converge around a few core dimensions. For example, in the American National Election Studies (ANES) project, Miller and Miller (1976) found that voter evaluations clustered around five principal traits: competence, trustworthiness, reliability, leadership appeal, and appearance. Later research has reinforced this structure, emphasizing traits such as competence, integrity, leadership, and empathy as being key to electoral judgments across various political contexts (Kinder, 1986).

Among these traits, integrity – often defined as honesty and moral uprightness – has consistently emerged as the most influential. Across decades of research, voters have cited honesty as an essential leadership quality (Kinder et al., 1980; McAllister, 2000; Sigel, 1964) and have relied on it as a heuristic for trust in situations where direct observation of political behavior is difficult (McCurley & Mondak, 1995).

In light of the growing public dissatisfaction with insincere, overly scripted, or tightly controlled political communication, it's clear why personal integrity is considered an essential leadership trait (Stiers et al., 2021). As voters become increasingly skeptical of rehearsed rhetoric and elite political personas, there is a rising demand for leaders who appear emotionally sincere and relatable (Garzia, 2011; Rahn et al., 1990). As Renshon (1995/2019, p. 201) observes, political legitimacy today is often derived “not by being above people,” but “by being of and like them.”

In this context, authenticity, which is defined by values such as consistency, sincerity, and emotional genuineness, has become an important indicator of a politician's credibility (Luebke, 2021; Parry-Giles, 2001). However, authenticity is not a fixed trait. Scholars consider it to be a relational and performative quality shaped by self-presentation and audience reception in mediated political spaces (Parry-Giles, 2001, p. 211).

This dynamic is particularly evident in the rise of populist leaders, who often succeed by appearing more “real” than their established counterparts (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018). Populists reject polished language and elite behavior in favor of blunt, emotionally charged communication styles to reinforce their image as relatable outsiders (Engesser et al., 2017). This style aligns with the core populist message that good, honest “people” are held back by a corrupt “elite.” Opponents are portrayed as inauthentic defenders of the status quo (Müller, 2017), while populists present

themselves as the true, unfiltered voice of the public will – or “*volonté générale*” (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017, p. 6).

In this context, authenticity is not merely a stylistic choice; it is a performative claim to legitimacy. Populist figures like Donald Trump, Rodrigo Duterte, and Jair Bolsonaro have taken advantage of this emotional appeal by presenting themselves as anti-establishment truth-tellers who “tell it like it is” (Akkerman et al., 2014; Mudde, 2013; Stiers et al., 2021). Their political appeal rests not only on ideological alignment but also on the emotional resonance of unscripted – even abrasive – expressions of honesty.

Together, these trends demonstrate that authenticity plays an increasingly central role in how political leaders are evaluated. As Parry-Giles (2001, p. 211) notes, authenticity has become “a notable means by which political candidates of the twenty-first century are measured.” Understanding authenticity is crucial for grasping the rise of populist challengers and for mainstream politicians who seek to connect with a skeptical electorate in a highly personalized, media-saturated political environment.

Conceptualizing Political Authenticity

To understand the rhetorical and symbolic power of authenticity as a leadership trait, it is important to first define what political authenticity entails, both conceptually and historically. A useful starting point is the term’s etymology: derived from the Greek *autos* (self) and *khresthai* (to bring about or act), “authenticity” originally connoted self-creation rather than expressing some fixed, inherent essence (Kearney, 1995) – a view also shared in the political sphere. Within this context, political authenticity is generally understood as the perceived alignment between a politician’s public actions and their “true” self – that is, their underlying beliefs, values, or identity (Fordahl, 2018; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Jones, 2016).

This notion draws heavily on Erving Goffman’s (1949) dramaturgical framework, which distinguishes between the “front stage” of public performance and the “backstage” private self. From this perspective, authenticity emerges when audiences perceive coherence between the two – when a politician’s outward performance appears to reflect a consistent, emotionally resonant inner self. As Jamieson and Waldman (2003, p. 29) argue, “Authenticity is not found in the absence of performance, but rather in a performance perceived as sincere, consistent, and minimally contrived.” Thus, a politician can appear authentic without being “true” in any absolute sense because it is perception, not reality, that matters.

Building on this view, Luebke (2021) proposes a multidimensional model for understanding political authenticity. According to him, four interrelated dimensions influence how voters perceive

authenticity: consistency, intimacy, ordinariness, and immediacy. Consistency refers to the alignment between a politician's words and actions over time. Intimacy involves disclosing personal experiences, emotions, or behind-the-scenes glimpses that give audiences access to the politician's "backstage self." Ordinariness denotes relatability, often achieved through informality, amateurism, or symbolic gestures associated with everyday life. Immediacy captures the sense of unfiltered, spontaneous communication, often amplified through live or unscripted media appearances.

Together, these dimensions are believed to shape perceptions of authenticity. For instance, a politician who shares a personal hardship during a town hall meeting may convey intimacy, while a politician who livestreams informal conversations in casual attire may project immediacy and ordinariness – both of which may be perceived as authentic. Crucially, the politician does not actually have to be spontaneous, ordinary, or emotionally vulnerable; it is the perception of coherence between self-presentation and inner self that ultimately defines authenticity (Enli, 2015; Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Luebke, 2021).

Social media plays a central role in how politicians construct and perform this sense of authenticity. Unlike traditional broadcast media, where editorial norms and gatekeeping practices mediate communication, digital platforms allow politicians to bypass intermediaries and engage directly with their audiences (Enli & Skogerbo, 2013; Kreiss et al., 2020). This environment also fosters what Baym (2010) calls "self-personalized communication", in which politicians create an impression of proximity and informality by sharing candid selfies, hosting live Q&A sessions, and sharing personal stories (Lee et al., 2020; Shane, 2018).

These performances help create a sense of social presence – the feeling of a direct, personal connection with the speaker (Baym, 2010; Biocca & Nowak, 2001). They also encourage parasocial relationships, in which people form one-sided emotional bonds with political figures they have never actually met (Horton & Wohl, 1956). In this way, authenticity profoundly influences how politicians are judged, not only in terms of their policies but also in terms of how relatable and trustworthy they seem personally.

Authenticity and Affective Judgments: Warmth as a Gateway to Emotional Engagement

One of the most immediate and psychologically consequential effects of perceived political authenticity is its impact on how voters assess interpersonal warmth – a concept encompassing traits such as friendliness, sincerity, empathy, and benevolence (Cuddy et al., 2011; Fiske et al., 2007). These warmth-related perceptions play a central role in forming emotional connections between candidates and their constituents.

While research in political science has traditionally emphasized competence as the more decisive trait in candidate evaluations and voting decisions (Funk, 1996, 1999; Kinder, 1986; Markus, 1982), social psychological research offers a different perspective. These studies argue that, in general, warmth is central to social perception and often takes precedence over competence when individuals form impressions of others (Fiske et al., 2007; Laustsen, 2021; McGraw, 2011).

This primacy of warmth is deeply rooted in evolutionary logic. As Fiske et al. (2007) suggest, the most fundamental question humans have historically needed to answer about others is not “Can this person act?” but rather “Does this person mean well?” In this view, judgments of moral intent – which are closely tied to warmth – are more urgent and adaptive than judgments of ability. Accordingly, perceptions of warmth often shape approach-avoidance behaviors, serving as the foundation of interpersonal evaluation (Cacioppo et al., 1997; Peeters, 2002).

Within this framework, authenticity functions as a critical cue for perceived warmth. Researchers have found that people respond more positively to individuals who reveal personal, consistent, and emotionally congruent aspects of themselves (Manne et al., 2004; Vittengl & Holt, 2000). Applied to political contexts, candidates perceived as authentic should elicit more favorable emotional responses because they are seen as internally consistent and grounded in relatable lived experiences (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Luebke, 2021). Furthermore, authentic leaders provide voters with cues that suggest moral intent, emotional congruence, and interpersonal accessibility (Garzia, 2011; Luebke, 2021; Stiers et al., 2021) – qualities that directly correspond to the dimensions of interpersonal warmth.

However, the relationship between authenticity and warmth is asymmetrical. While authenticity can significantly increase emotional engagement, perceived inauthenticity tends to elicit disproportionately negative reactions. Political figures who appear scripted, emotionally detached, or overly curated are not only perceived as lacking warmth, but also as inauthentic and unrelatable (Abramowitz, 1991; McDermott et al., 2015; Peters & Welch, 1980). Thus, in today’s political environment, where emotional realism is in high demand, authenticity is not only advantageous but also necessary for promoting positive emotional evaluations.

Building on this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H1a: Participants exposed to the intimacy/immediacy treatment will feel warmer towards the politician than participants in the control group.

H1b: Participants exposed to the ordinariness treatment will feel warmer towards the politician than participants in the control group.

Authenticity and Evaluative Confidence: Trust in the Absence of Evidence

While perceptions of warmth stem from quick, intuitive judgments about a politician's likability and emotional accessibility, political trust requires deeper, more thoughtful evaluations. As Gamson (1968) observed, trust is the belief that leaders will produce preferred outcomes without direct oversight, while Easton (1975) defined it as citizens' confidence that leaders will act in their best interests.

Traditionally, political trust has been anchored in perceptions of competence – the ability to govern effectively (Bittner, 2011; Miller et al., 1986) – and integrity – the willingness to act honestly and keep promises (Grimmelikhuijsen & Knies, 2017; Valgarðsson et al., 2021). Recently, however, benevolence – the perception that leaders genuinely care about the public good – has been recognized as a critical third dimension (Hamm et al., 2019; Mayer et al., 1995).

In this context, authenticity plays a pivotal role. When political figures are perceived as emotionally open, personally grounded, or socially relatable, these qualities act as affective cues from which voters infer benevolent intentions. Especially in the absence of concrete evidence of policy outcomes, authenticity can substitute for less observable qualities (Mondak et al., 2017). It becomes a symbolic marker indicating that a leader is not acting out of strategic self-interest, but rather from a place of emotional and moral alignment with the public (Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Luebke, 2021).

For example, Valgarðsson et al. (2024) demonstrate that perceived authenticity significantly increases citizens' trust in politicians across cultural and economic contexts, with effects comparable to or even greater than those associated with traditional trust cues, such as competence and integrity. Moreover, in addition to promoting trust, previous findings show that authenticity also enhances perceptions of a politician's moral character, increasing perceived integrity and reducing voter cynicism (Brewer et al., 2014). In contrast, a lack of authenticity can be politically costly. Leaders who are perceived as evasive, overly rehearsed, or inconsistent tend to suffer significant losses in perceived credibility and competence (McDermott et al., 2015), highlighting the reputational risks of appearing out of touch with citizens' expectations.

Based on this theoretical framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H2a: Participants exposed to the intimacy/immediacy treatment will report higher levels of political trust than participants in the control group.

H2b: Participants exposed to the ordinariness treatment will report higher levels of political trust than participants in the control group.

Authenticity and Electoral Behavior: A Heuristic for Voter Decision-Making

While authenticity can strongly influence affective responses, such as warmth and trust, its most tangible political impact is realized through voting behavior. Unlike affective impressions, which are attitudinal in nature, voting is a behavioral commitment – a decision to actively support one candidate over another in a competitive electoral context.

Traditional models of voter behavior have long emphasized ideological congruence, issue orientation, and partisan identification as the primary determinants of vote choice (Campbell et al., 1960; Downs, 1957). However, political psychology has increasingly shown that these factors often compete with more cognitively accessible cues, particularly in contexts where voters lack the time, motivation, or resources to deeply engage with political content. In such situations, voters often rely on candidate-centered heuristics – mental shortcuts based on observable characteristics, such as demeanor, personal style, or perceived moral character – to make voting decisions (Bittner, 2011; Funk, 1996; Kinder et al., 1980; Lau & Redlawsk, 2006; Popkin, 1991).

As King (2002, p. 13) succinctly notes, “The world of politics is a complicated world, one that most voters are not frightfully interested in and do not know a great deal about [...] Under these circumstances, it is hardly surprising that many voters, pressed by pollsters, television interviewers and others to expound their political views, fall back on references to leaders, candidates and their personalities.” In other words, voters often use a politician’s personality and perceived character as a shortcut to make judgments about them.

This reliance on personality is deeply tied to how modern political life is experienced. Unlike earlier eras when political knowledge was primarily shaped by direct civic engagement or in-depth political deliberation, today’s citizens mostly encounter politics through curated media content, such as debates, ads, and interviews, especially on social media (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Sides & Vavreck, 2013). While these channels have undeniably broadened access to political discourse, they also heighten the focus on candidates’ personal traits, making character and presentation central to public evaluation.

In this personalized, media-saturated environment, authenticity has become a key political trait, partly because it is digitally embedded in the logics of media platforms. Features like Facebook bios, personal tweets (Zappavigna, 2016), and everyday Instagram posts (Borges-Rey, 2015) foreground intimacy and relatability, promoting authenticity as a social norm (Dumitrica & Gaden, 2015). Empirical evidence also increasingly confirms its electoral impact. For example, Stiers et al. (2021) found that perceived authenticity strongly predicted vote choice across Western democracies. In the U.S., Kenny et al. (2021) demonstrated that authenticity influences voting intentions beyond

ideology or policy views. In Germany, Luebke and Engelmann (2022) revealed that candidate authenticity can rival and sometimes surpass party affiliation in shaping voter preferences.

Based on this theoretical rationale, the following hypotheses are proposed:

H3a: Participants exposed to the intimacy/immediacy treatment will report higher levels of voting intention than participants in the control group.

H3b: Participants exposed to the ordinariness treatment will report higher levels of voting intention than participants in the control group.

Authenticity and Political Predispositions: When and for Whom It Matters

While authenticity generally enhances perceptions of warmth, trustworthiness, and electability, its effects are not distributed uniformly across the electorate. Emerging evidence suggests that voters' evaluations of candidate traits are systematically shaped by their political predispositions and levels of engagement (Laustsen, 2021). To understand when and for whom authenticity matters most, two competing models of political information processing must be considered: motivated reasoning and parallel updating.

Political psychology has long demonstrated that citizens do not process information in a neutral or detached manner. Instead, political cognition is highly motivated and selective, driven by ideological beliefs, social identities, and emotional partisanship (Lodge & Taber, 2013; Taber & Lodge, 2006). These dynamics fall under the concept of biased assimilation, as described by Lord, Ross, and Lepper (1979, p. 2098): "People who hold strong opinions on complex social issues are likely to examine relevant empirical evidence in a biased manner, accepting confirming evidence at face value while subjecting disconfirming evidence to critical scrutiny."

Building on this foundation, Kunda's (1990) theory of motivated reasoning posits that individuals process political information in a self-serving manner, embracing information that reinforces their preexisting beliefs and dismissing information that challenges them.

Ideological orientation plays a central role in this selective filtering process, shaping how citizens interpret policy issues and political leadership. Numerous studies have consistently found that right-leaning voters are more responsive to leadership effects than their left-leaning counterparts (Barisione, 2007; Lobo, 2006; Van der Brug & Mughan, 2007). This asymmetry reflects broader patterns in leadership styles: while right-wing movements tend to emphasize charismatic, personalized leadership, mainstream left- and center-left parties generally favor bureaucratic, institutionalized forms of leadership (Eatwell, 2003; Farrand & Farrand, 2021; Kitschelt, 1995; Schoonvelde et al., 2019; Schürmann & Gründl, 2022; Taggart, 2001).

Additionally, voters with weak partisan ties – often disengaged or former nonvoters – tend to be more receptive to emotional, personal messages that avoid complicated political ideas (Dalton, 2014; Lubbers & Scheepers, 2001). The German case vividly illustrates this dynamic. The rapid rise of the right-wing party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) has largely been fueled by disaffected former nonvoters. Survey data suggest that these voters were less motivated by detailed policy agendas, but rather by frustration and alienation from the political establishment (Infratest dimap, 2025).

Political awareness also influences how voters respond to authenticity. Commonly understood as a combination of factual political knowledge and cognitive engagement (Fiske et al., 1983; McGraw & Pinney, 1990; Zaller, 1992), political awareness influences the evaluative strategies voters use when assessing political information. Research suggests that politically sophisticated individuals are more likely to evaluate candidates based on policy positions and ideological alignment, whereas less informed voters tend to rely on more superficial cues, such as a candidate's image or the emotional tone of a campaign (Lachat, 2015).

Zaller's (1992) Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model offers a crucial refinement by proposing that political awareness moderates persuasion susceptibility in a curvilinear fashion. According to this framework, individuals with low political awareness generally remain unaffected by political messages due to a lack of interest or knowledge to engage with or process such information. In contrast, highly aware individuals tend to resist opposing views by selectively exposing themselves to attitude-consistent messages and rejecting opposing views. Zaller argues that those with moderate political awareness are most susceptible to persuasion because they are engaged enough to notice and process political information, yet they are not strongly committed to particular viewpoints.

While both Zaller's Receive-Accept-Sample (RAS) model and the theory of motivated reasoning highlight the limits of persuasion, Page and Shapiro's (1993) "parallel publics" thesis offers a more optimistic perspective. According to this model, the citizenry is capable of updating its opinions in a coherent and responsive manner across ideological divides. Recent empirical work by Coppock (2023) supports this view: through a series of individual-level experiments, he demonstrates that both Democrats and Republicans adjust their views in response to persuasive news content at comparable rates, regardless of their prior beliefs. While Coppock's research focused on "cold" information, Georgarakis (2021) extended these findings to emotionally charged issues, such as terrorism and climate change, suggesting that emotionally resonant appeals, such as authenticity, may also transcend partisan boundaries.

In sum, motivated reasoning predicts that perceptions of authenticity will be filtered through ideological biases, with right-leaning and less politically engaged voters being particularly

susceptible. Parallel updating, by contrast, suggests that authenticity can exert persuasive effects across ideological lines. Depending on the model, political awareness either amplifies these partisan filters (RAS model) or leaves persuasion largely unaffected (parallel updating).

Empirical evidence supports both perspectives. Some studies demonstrate that partisanship moderates reactions to candidate traits (Brewer et al., 2014; Druckman et al., 2013; Slothuus & de Vreese, 2010), while others show that authenticity retains its persuasive power across partisan divides (Hill, 2017; Luebke & Engelmann, 2022; Stiers et al., 2021).

Taken together, these competing theoretical perspectives yield distinct but testable hypotheses regarding how perceived authenticity interacts with political predispositions:

H4a (Parallel Updating Hypothesis): The effects of the authenticity treatments on warmth, trust and voting intention will be similar across ideological orientations.

H4b (Motivated Reasoning Hypothesis): The effects of the authenticity treatments on warmth, trust and voting intention will be moderated by ideological orientation, with right-leaning participants responding more positively than left-leaning participants.

H4c (Parallel Updating Hypothesis): There will be no moderating effect of political awareness on the relationship between treatment condition and warmth, trust, or voting intention.

H4d (RAS Model): The effects of the authenticity treatments on warmth, trust and voting intention will be moderated by political awareness in a non-linear manner, with moderately aware individuals showing stronger effects than those with either low or high awareness.

Research Design and Methods

Sample and Experimental Design

To empirically test the study's two overarching research questions and associated hypotheses, an online survey experiment was conducted with adult participants residing in Germany. Participants had to be at least 18 years old and German citizens to ensure familiarity with the country's political landscape and media environment.

Before launching the study, a preliminary power analysis for linear multiple regression was conducted using the pwr package in R (Champely, 2020). Based on moderate effect sizes observed in a second pilot study ($N = 49$; $\beta = 1.41$, $p = .004$, adjusted $R^2 = .14$), a medium effect size ($f^2 \approx .15$) was assumed, following Cohen's (1988/2013) guidelines. Although some researchers advocate powering for smaller effects (e.g., $f^2 = .01$; Luebke & Engelmann, 2022), a medium effect was deemed

appropriate given study scope and resource limits. With seven predictors – two treatment dummies and five covariates – the analysis indicated a required sample size of approximately 102 participants for 80% power at $\alpha = .05$.

Participants were recruited through a snowball sampling strategy over a data collection period of just over four weeks, from April 17 to May 19, 2025. Invitations were distributed primarily through digital channels, including social media platforms, email distribution lists, and online forums. To encourage participation and increase sample diversity, participants were offered the opportunity to enter a drawing for Amazon gift cards upon completing the survey.

To ensure data quality and participant attentiveness, three instructional attention checks were embedded in the survey before the experimental manipulation. Participants who failed any one of these checks were excluded from the analytic sample. Of the initial 149 respondents, 14 failed the first attention check, 16 failed the second, and 19 failed the third. Additional exclusions were applied to cases with missing values on key experimental variables, resulting in a final sample of 110 valid participants. This final sample size exceeded the pre-specified power threshold of 102, thereby providing adequate power to detect medium effects.

To ensure internal validity and reduce selection bias, the participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: a control group with no authenticity cues ($n = 44$), a group with intimacy/immediacy cues ($n = 34$) in the treatment condition, and a group with ordinariness cues ($n = 32$) in the treatment condition. This design allows for causal inferences regarding the impact of visual authenticity cues on voter perceptions and behavior.

The final sample showed variation in terms of age, gender, education level, and political ideology. However, it skewed toward younger individuals with higher levels of education and leaned toward the political center-left. Full demographic details are provided in Appendix A.

Procedure

Participants accessed the study through the online survey platform QuestionPro, where they first provided informed consent. Prior to viewing the experimental stimuli, they completed a brief pre-treatment questionnaire that collected demographic information, levels of political engagement, and ideological orientation. These measures allowed for subsequent exploratory moderation analyses and an examination of potential interaction effects between individual-level characteristics and stimulus exposure.

In addition, to enhance data quality and ensure participant attention, three attention check questions were administered prior to the presentation of the experimental content. Participants were

then randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions using the platform's built-in randomization algorithm.

The experimental stimuli consisted of simulated Instagram posts designed to reflect the visual and communicative norms of contemporary political branding. Instagram was chosen as the target medium due to its growing importance in political communication (Zulli, 2018; Zulli & Tower, 2021) and its popularity among younger users, especially Generation Z (Ferguson, 2020). Each stimulus featured the same fictional male candidate, with AI-generated images to mimic real political aesthetics while avoiding recognition bias. The final set of stimuli emerged from an iterative development process informed by two rounds of pilot testing, which helped shape both the visual content and the accompanying measurement instruments (see Appendix A for details).

The fictional candidate's persona was loosely modeled after Markus Söder, the prime minister of Bavaria and a prominent figure in the Christian Social Union (CSU). Söder's Instagram presence demonstrates how formal political messages can be combined with emotional and relatable content. His posts include everything from institutional updates to casual moments, such as sharing Bavarian food with the hashtag #Söderisst or performing Christmas carols on Reels. This makes him a strong example of how authenticity is presented through social media in German politics.

To isolate the effects of perceived authenticity cues, participants were randomly assigned to view one of three Instagram posts: (1) intimacy/immediacy, (2) ordinariness, or (3) a control condition reflecting traditional political communication. While Luebke's (2021) proposed dimension of consistency is an important facet of authenticity, it was excluded from this study because its assessment requires longitudinal data, which is beyond the scope of this study. All remaining posts focused on the neutral topic of food and nutrition to ensure consistency in content while allowing for visual and narrative variation. To ensure internal validity, visual elements such as layout, color, interface, and engagement metrics were standardized across conditions. This ensured that any observed effects could be explicitly attributed to the authenticity cues embedded in the stimuli rather than to incidental design differences.

Intimacy and Immediacy Condition

The intimacy/immediacy condition depicted the fictional candidate in a domestic setting, captured in selfie format alongside two family members at a dinner table. This visual scene was designed to activate two different dimensions of perceived political authenticity: intimacy and immediacy (Enli, 2015; Luebke, 2021).

Intimacy was conveyed through both the private setting and the heartfelt, personal content of the caption. The private and familial context served as a visual cue, providing access to the

candidate's "backstage self" (Goffman, 1949) – a domain typically shielded from public view (Ferrara, 1992; Raun, 2018). Such settings are often perceived as authentic because they invite emotional openness beyond institutional constraints (Lilleker, 2006; Sheinheit & Bogard, 2016). The accompanying caption reinforced this reading by revealing biographical details and situating the dinner table as the origin of the candidate's political journey. In line with the "confessional" style often associated with authenticity narratives (Dumitrica, 2014; Dumitrica & Gaden, 2015; Enli, 2015; Manning et al., 2017), the caption also revealed emotional vulnerability through gratitude and introspection.

Immediacy was conveyed through both visual and linguistic cues. Visually, the selfie format suggested spontaneity and informality, implying a more direct and less mediated connection between the candidate and the viewer (Enli, 2015; Shane, 2018). Linguistically, the use of present-tense phrases in the caption, such as the immediate "As I stand here today," and, especially in the final version, the emotionally intuitive "Honest conversations over shared meals taught me to trust my feelings and lead with heart," enhanced the impression of emotional presence and lived experience. During pilot testing, an earlier version of the caption ("[...] gave me strength and clarity") was found to be insufficient in expressing emotional spontaneity. The revised wording was adopted to better align with the construct of immediacy and to emphasize affective responsiveness. As Enli (2015) argues, immediacy is closely related to "liveness" – the sense that communication is unfolding in real time – which fosters a shared experiential moment between the politician and the audience (Rasmussen, 2000; Salisbury & Pooley, 2017).



Thomas Schneider My political journey did not begin on a political stage, but at the dinner table. Honest conversations over shared meals taught me to trust my feelings and lead with heart. Thank you to my family - your support has shaped every step of this campaign. As I stand here today as Prime Minister, I also owe it to you. ❤️

#Gratitude #Family #StateElection



Thomas Schneider Mein politischer Weg begann nicht auf der politischen Bühne, sondern am Esstisch. Ehrliche Gespräche beim gemeinsamen Essen haben mich gelehrt, meinen Gefühlen zu vertrauen und mit dem Herzen zu führen. Danke an meine Familie – eure Unterstützung hat jeden Schritt dieses Wahlkampfes geprägt. Dass ich heute als Ministerpräsident hier stehe, verdanke ich auch euch. ❤️

#Dankbarkeit #Familie #Landtagswahl

Figure 1. *Instagram post – Intimacy & Immediacy condition (English version)*

Figure 2. *Instagram post – Intimacy & Immediacy condition (German version)*

Ordinariness Condition

In the ordinariness condition, the fictional candidate was shown mid-bite, eating a kebab at a modest street food stall, casually surrounded by members of the public. Dressed informally, with his jacket slung over one arm and a bottle of Ayran in his hand, he was captured in a candid, slightly chaotic moment. The everyday nature of the scene – unpolished, spontaneous, and culturally familiar – was designed to evoke the symbolic performance of ordinariness, a well-documented strategy by which political figures construct relatability by aligning themselves with the routines and aesthetics of everyday life (Enli, 2015; Frame, 2016; Wood et al., 2016).

This visual design was introduced in response to pilot feedback that the original version, which depicted a selfie of the candidate eating a kebab in front of the German federal parliament, did not have a meaningful effect on perceived ordinariness. While intended to contrast informality with

institutional gravitas, the parliamentary backdrop may have overemphasized political authority, thereby undermining the authenticity of the “everyday” performance. The revised stimulus removed the institutional cues and placed the candidate in a familiar, informal public setting to make him appear more ordinary and approachable.

The accompanying caption complemented this visual strategy with a humorous, colloquial tone. It detailed the candidate’s food order, referenced the timing of ongoing coalition talks, mentioned a near mishap involving spilled yogurt sauce on his notes, and concluded with a personal shout-out to the vendor who came to the rescue – #MyManDenis. These narrative choices were intentionally designed to break from the polished professionalism of traditional political messaging and instead mimic the unscripted, amateur aesthetic typical of everyday social media interactions (Lilleker, 2006; Manning et al., 2017).

Crucially, the inclusion of small imperfections – such as the yogurt spill – functioned as intentional cues to imperfection. As Enli (2015) argues, slight awkwardness, physical gaffes, or casual phrasing can signal authenticity by puncturing the carefully curated image of institutional politics. These “authentic flaws” (Sheinheit & Bogard, 2016) serve to humanize public figures by positioning them as relatable individuals who, like everyone else, sometimes make mistakes.



Figure 3. *Instagram post – Ordinarity condition (English version)*

Figure 4. *Instagram post – Ordinarity condition (German version)*

Control Condition

In the control condition, the fictional candidate was shown delivering a political speech from behind a podium in a formal setting, flanked by officials and institutional signage. The image was set up in a way that made the candidate appear authoritative and professional, in line with the typical style of official political campaigns. The accompanying caption reinforced this image with a technocratic tone that emphasized issues such as food security, sustainability, and government responsibility.

This framing was intended to reflect Weber's (1947/2009) concept of rational-legal authority, in which legitimacy is derived from adherence to formal procedures, bureaucratic norms, and the

impersonal application of rules. In contrast to charismatic forms of authority, rational-legal legitimacy is anchored in expertise, institutional roles, and a clear separation between public duty and personal emotion. Accordingly, the control stimulus was devoid of affective language, biographical details, or informal tone. Furthermore, it intentionally excluded cues associated with emotional expressiveness or personal disclosure to contrast with the intimacy/immediacy and ordinariness conditions. Functionally, this condition served as a baseline against which the perceived effects of authenticity framing could be assessed.



Figure 5. *Instagram post – Control condition (English version)*

Figure 6. *Instagram post – Control condition (German version)*

After stimulus exposure, participants completed a series of post-treatment measures assessing affective warmth, trust, and voting intention. These were followed by manipulation checks targeting the perceived salience of the two treatment dimensions. Specifically, participants rated four items for each dimension using the Perceived Political Authenticity (P-PA) scale (Luebke & Engelmann, 2023). The survey concluded with a final attention check, an optional open-ended comment box, and a debriefing screen. To enhance transparency and research integrity, the full experimental procedure,

including the hypotheses, design, and analysis plan, was preregistered on the Open Science Framework (OSF). It is publicly available at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/U4JDW>.

Analytical Plan

A series of structured statistical analyses was conducted to rigorously test the research questions developed in this study. Ordinary least squares (OLS) regression models were estimated in R to assess the effects of treatments on perceptions of warmth, political trust, and voting intention, and to examine the moderating roles of ideological orientation and political awareness. All models included pretreatment covariates – age, gender, education, and political interest – to account for potential confounding influences. To account for variation resulting from random assignment, heteroskedasticity-consistent robust standard errors (HC2) were computed. Additionally, all continuous variables were standardized before analysis to facilitate interpretation of the regression coefficients.

The analytical process was carried out in multiple stages. First, two pilots were conducted to pretest and refine the experimental stimuli. The second pilot test confirmed that the manipulations were effective in influencing perceptions of political authenticity, as measured by the ordinariness and intimacy/immediacy dimensions. Embedded manipulation checks in the main study further validated the effectiveness of the treatment conditions (see Appendix A for detailed results).

Descriptive statistics and pre-treatment balance checks across experimental groups are reported in Appendix A. While only minor imbalances were observed, all subsequent regression models controlled for covariates to adjust for any remaining pre-treatment differences.

To assess the main effects of the treatments, separate OLS models were estimated regressing warmth, trust, and voting intention on the experimental conditions – perceived ordinariness and intimacy/immediacy – while controlling for relevant demographic and political variables. The general model specification for these analyses was:

$$Y_i = a_i + bZ_i + cX_i + \varepsilon_i$$

where Y_i represents the outcome variable (warmth, trust, or voting intention), Z_i is the treatment condition, X_i is a vector of covariates (e.g., age, gender, political interest, ideology), and ε_i is the error term. The coefficient b captures the effect of the treatment on the outcome, while c reflects the strength of association between the covariates and the dependent variable.

To examine heterogeneity in treatment effects, interaction models were estimated by including two-way interaction terms between treatment conditions (perceived authenticity) and

ideological self-positioning. Ideological orientation was measured on a 10-point left-right scale and subsequently standardized. The extended model specification was:

$$Y_i = a_i + bZ_i + cIdeology_i + d(Z_i \times Ideology_i) + eX_i + \varepsilon_i$$

These models were used to assess whether treatment effects varied systematically across the ideological spectrum, while controlling for relevant demographic and political covariates.

Further analyses included the estimation of nonlinear moderation models to assess whether political awareness conditioned the effects of the authenticity treatment across levels of ideological orientation. Political awareness was operationalized as a standardized index combining political interest and educational attainment (Zaller, 1992). To capture potential curvilinear moderation, the models included a quadratic interaction term between the treatment condition and the squared awareness index. The formal model specification was:

$$Y_i = a_i + bZ_i + cX_i + dAwareness_i + f(Z_i \times Awareness_i^2)X_i + gCovariates_i + \varepsilon_i$$

Model comparisons were conducted using F-tests to determine whether the inclusion of interaction terms significantly improved the fit of the models relative to the baseline specifications. Standardized coefficients and robust standard errors are reported throughout to facilitate interpretation of the effects.

Measures

This study relied on a well-established, theory-based set of instruments to define and measure its main concepts. It focused on one independent variable (treatment condition), three dependent variables (warmth, political trust, and voting intention), two moderators (political awareness and ideological orientation), a manipulation control, and several sociodemographic covariates.

The independent variable, namely the treatment condition, was operationalized by exposure to a fictional Instagram post attributed to a political candidate. Participants were randomly assigned to one of three experimental conditions: intimacy/immediacy, ordinariness, or control. The two treatment conditions were designed to reflect different dimensions of political authenticity as theorized by Luebke (2021), while the control condition presented a neutral, policy-focused message with no authenticity cues. For regression analyses, the treatment conditions were dummy coded, with the control group serving as the reference category.

The study examined three dependent variables, all measured immediately after exposure to the experimental stimuli. Warmth toward the fictional candidate was assessed using a feeling

thermometer adapted from the American National Election Studies (ANES, 2020b), with responses ranging from 0 (cold/unfavorable) to 100 (warm/favorable). Political trust was measured using a single-item scale adapted from the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2023), in which participants rated their trust in the candidate on a 10-point scale (0 = not trust at all; 10 = completely trust). Voting intention was assessed using an item from the ANES (2020a): “How likely are you to vote for this politician in an upcoming election?” Responses were recorded on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = not at all likely; 7 = extremely likely).

To examine the moderating effects, the study measured political awareness and ideological orientation. Political awareness was operationalized as a composite index, as outlined by Zaller (1992), by combining standardized scores for political interest and educational attainment. Political interest was assessed by asking, “How interested are you in politics in general?” on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = not at all interested; 5 = very interested) (ESS ERIC, 2023). Educational attainment was measured as the highest level of formal education completed, ranging from no formal schooling to a Ph.D. These two indicators were standardized and averaged to form a single index of political awareness, which yielded low internal consistency ($\alpha = 0.13$). However, given the conceptual justification for combining these measures and their frequent use in previous studies (e.g., Georgarakis, 2021; Zaller, 1992), the composite was kept as an overall indicator of political awareness. Ideological orientation was measured using a standard 10-point left-right self-placement scale ranging from 0 (far left) to 10 (far right), based on the European Social Survey (ESS ERIC, 2023). Ideology was treated as a continuous variable in all moderation and interaction models.

A manipulation check followed the outcome measures and stimulus exposure to assess whether the experimental treatments had successfully influenced perceptions of political authenticity. For this purpose, the study used an adapted version of the Perceived Political Authenticity (P-PA) scale developed by Luebke and Engelmann (2023). This scale captures the multidimensional, relational nature of authenticity judgments in political contexts and is more comprehensive than traditional unidimensional constructs such as sincerity or genuineness (e.g., Gershon & Smith, 2020; Stiers et al., 2021). In this study, two dimensions were assessed: ordinariness and immediacy/intimacy. Participants rated items on a 7-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree; 7 = strongly agree). Based on pilot testing, two items – “The politician is not aloof” and “The politician often acts emotionally” – were excluded due to low or ambiguous factor loadings.

Ordinariness was measured using three items: “The politician is down to earth,” “The politician speaks in a way that makes me feel familiar with him or her,” and “The politician resembles people you would meet down the street.” Immediacy/intimacy was also measured with three items: “The politician speaks openly and honestly about their life,” “The politician shares private thoughts, opinions, and feelings,” and “The politician allows others to share in their private life.” A mean index

was calculated for each dimension, and both subscales showed high internal consistency (ordinariness: $\alpha = 0.79$; immediacy/intimacy: $\alpha = 0.90$).

Finally, the study included a number of sociodemographic covariates to control for minor pre-treatment imbalances and to increase the precision of the estimated effects. Participants reported their age, gender (coded as 0 = male, 1 = female), and highest level of formal education. These variables were included in all statistical models and are summarized in the balance table (see Appendix A for detailed results).

Main Results

All statistical analyses were conducted using R version 4.1.1. Robust standard errors (HC2) were applied to account for potential heteroskedasticity in the data.

First, to assess the effectiveness of the experimental manipulations, a series of ordinary least squares regressions were performed to predict perceptions of ordinariness, intimacy/immediacy, and a composite authenticity index, with the experimental treatment condition as the key independent variable and the control group as the reference category.

The ordinariness treatment successfully increased perceptions of ordinariness relative to the control group ($\beta = 0.19$, $p < .001$) and did so more effectively than the intimacy/immediacy treatment ($\beta = 0.10$, $p = .046$). This suggests that the manipulation successfully targeted its intended authenticity subdimension. However, the intimacy/immediacy treatment also produced a modest, yet statistically significant, increase in ordinariness perceptions, indicating some conceptual overlap between the two authenticity dimensions (Model 1, $R^2 = .139$, $p < .001$).

For the intimacy/immediacy index, both treatments significantly enhanced perceptions of intimacy and immediacy ($\beta = 0.33$ and $\beta = 0.34$ for the ordinariness and intimacy/immediacy treatments, respectively; both $p < .001$), suggesting substantial cross-loading. Although the intimacy/immediacy treatment performed as intended, the spillover effect from the ordinariness manipulation indicates a higher level of construct overlap than is theoretically ideal (Model 2, $R^2 = .311$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that intimacy may be influenced by various signs of authenticity, regardless of how they are presented.

To capture overall perceptions of political authenticity, a composite index was constructed by averaging scores on the ordinariness and intimacy/immediacy dimensions. As expected, both treatments significantly elevated this index compared to the control. The ordinariness manipulation exerted a slightly stronger effect ($\beta = 0.29$, $p < .001$) than the intimacy/immediacy manipulation ($\beta =$

0.24, $p < .001$) (Model 3, $R^2 = .267$, $p < .001$). These results confirm the overall effectiveness of the treatments in increasing perceived authenticity. Figure 7 offers a visual summary of these effects.

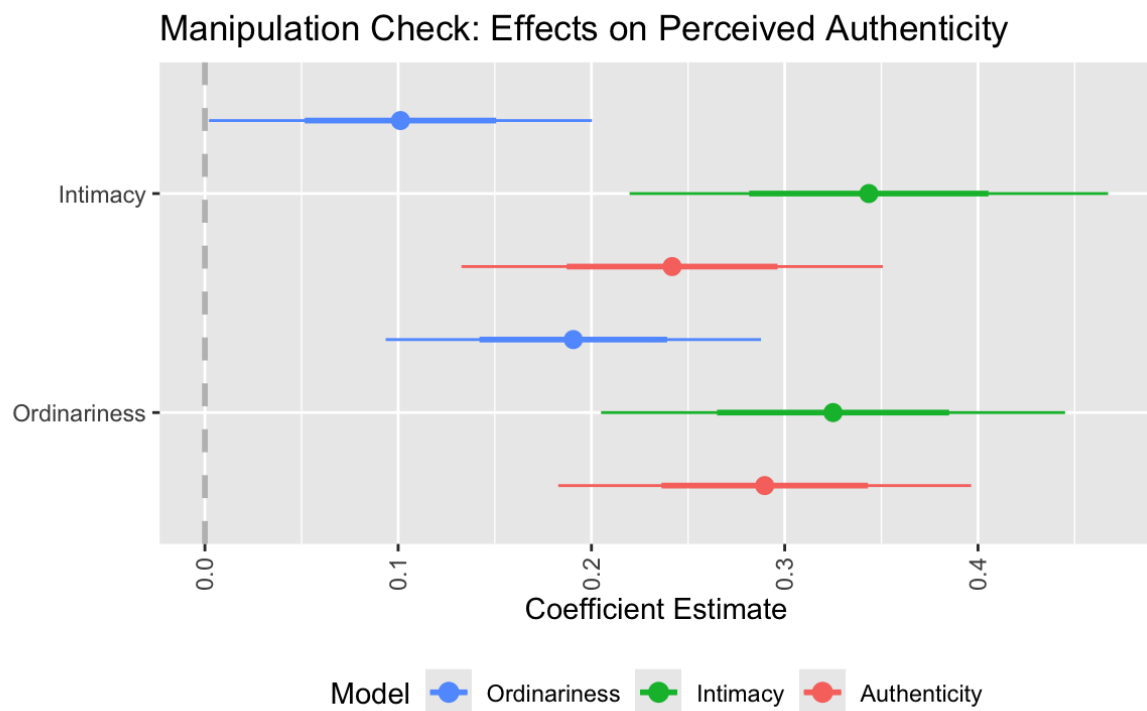


Figure 7. *Effects of Experimental Treatments on Perceived Ordinarity, Intimacy, and Overall Authenticity (Manipulation Check)*

After the manipulation checks, the analysis proceeded to test whether the authenticity treatments influenced political evaluations, as outlined in Research Question 1 and Hypotheses H1-H3. Three outcome variables were examined: affective warmth, political trust, and voting intention. All models controlled for age, gender, education, and political interest.

H1a and H1b predicted increases in affective warmth following exposure to the intimacy/immediacy and ordinarity treatments, respectively. Consistent with H1a, participants in the intimacy/immediacy condition reported significantly greater warmth ($\beta = 0.11$, $p = .050$), even when controlling for relevant demographic and attitudinal variables. However, no significant effect was observed for the ordinarity treatment ($\beta = -0.06$, $p = .256$), providing no support for H1b (Model 4, $R^2 = .221$, $p < .001$). These results suggest that expressing emotion in an immediate manner may be more effective than simply being relatable in creating positive emotional responses.

Regarding political trust, H2a and H2b predicted that both treatments would enhance perceptions of trustworthiness. However, support was found only for the intimacy/immediacy condition. Participants in this group reported significantly higher levels of political trust than the control group ($\beta = 0.16$, $p = .013$), thus supporting H2a. The ordinarity condition showed no

significant effect ($\beta = -0.05, p = .425$) thus failing to support H2b (Model 5, $R^2 = .186, p = .005$). These findings indicate that voters may trust politicians more when they appear sincere and emotionally accessible rather than merely ordinary.

H3a and H3b examined whether either treatment influenced voting intention. Neither the intimacy/immediacy condition ($\beta = 0.06, p = .443$) nor the ordinariness condition ($\beta = -0.06, p = .242$) had a significant effect (Model 6, $R^2 = .184, p = .011$). These null results suggest that, although authenticity cues influence affective and trust-related evaluations, they may not directly translate into behavioral intentions, such as vote choice. An overview of the effects of these treatments across all three outcome measures – warmth, trust, and voting behavior – is presented in Figure 8.

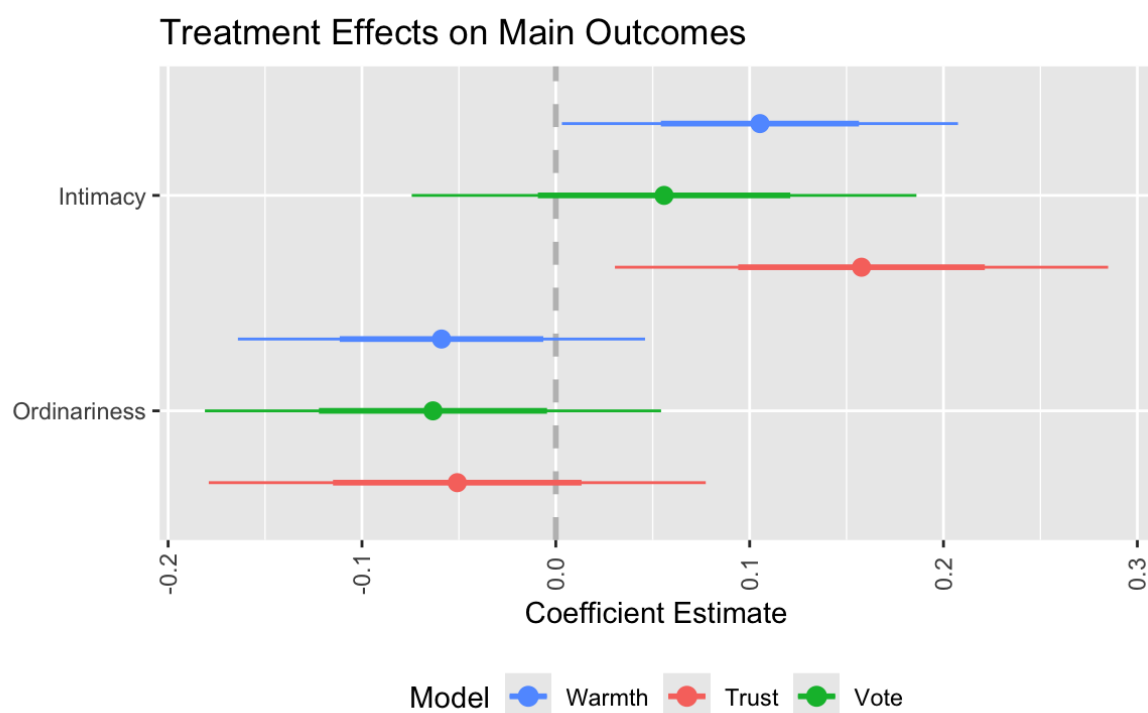


Figure 8. *Estimated Treatment Effects on Main Outcomes Across Models*

In line with Research Question 2, interaction models tested whether the effects of the authenticity treatments on warmth, political trust, and vote intention varied by participants' ideological orientation. These models included interaction terms between the treatment condition and a standardized left-right ideology measure, controlling for gender, age, education, and political interest. Figure 9 visualizes the results of these moderation analyses, displaying the interaction effects across all three outcome measures.

Hypotheses H4a and H4b reflect competing theoretical expectations. According to H4a (parallel updating), treatment effects should be consistent across ideological groups. In contrast, H4b

(motivated reasoning) predicts stronger effects among right-leaning participants, who may be more attuned to authenticity cues.

In the warmth model, the interaction between intimacy/immediacy and ideology was positive but did not reach conventional significance ($\beta = 0.35$, $p = .113$; 95% $CI [-0.04, 0.74]$), suggesting a potential trend toward stronger responsiveness among right-leaning participants. However, due to the imprecision of the estimate, this remains speculative. The interaction involving the ordinariness treatment was nonsignificant ($\beta = 0.07$, $p = .709$) (Model 7, $R^2 = .247$, $p = .002$).

For political trust, neither interaction was significant (intimacy/immediacy $\times$ ideology: $\beta = 0.25$, $p = .327$; ordinariness $\times$ ideology: $\beta = -0.16$, $p = .521$), indicating no evidence of ideological moderation (Model 8, $R^2 = .226$, $p = .009$). Similarly, the vote intention model showed null interactions (intimacy/immediacy $\times$ ideology: $\beta = 0.14$, $p = .644$; ordinariness $\times$ ideology: $\beta = -0.02$, $p = .929$) (Model 9, $R^2 = .205$, $p = .035$). Collectively, these results align more closely with H4a, suggesting that responses to authenticity cues were largely consistent across ideological lines.

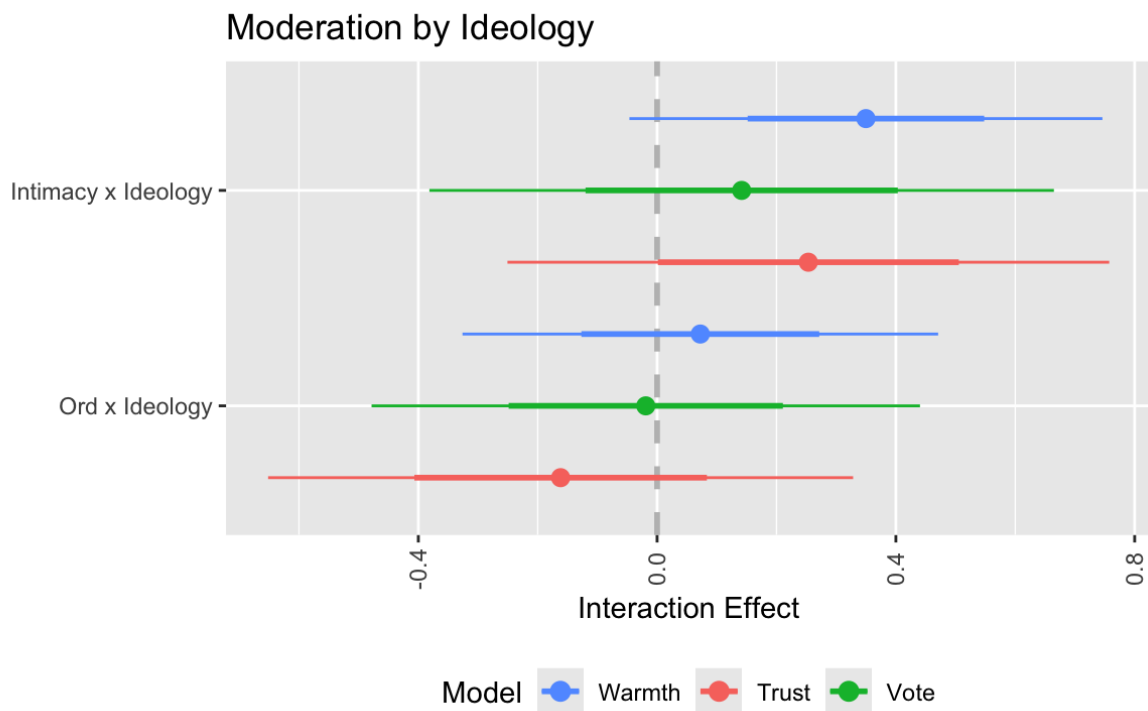


Figure 9. *Interaction Effects of Treatment and Political Ideology on Main Outcomes*

To address RQ2 further and test H4c and H4d, additional interaction models were estimated to assess whether the effects of the authenticity treatments were moderated by participants' political awareness. In line with the RAS model (Zaller, 1992), political awareness was modeled quadratically to test for non-linear moderation (H4d), alongside a null hypothesis of no moderation (H4c). Figure

10 illustrates the resulting interaction effects across outcome measures and provides a visual summary of these moderation analyses.

In the warmth model, no significant interactions emerged (intimacy/immediacy $\times$ awareness²: $\beta = -0.33$, $p = .314$; ordinariness $\times$ awareness²: $\beta = -0.29$, $p = .371$) (Model 10, $R^2 = .238$, $p = .005$). Similar results were obtained in the trust model (intimacy/immediacy $\times$ awareness²: $\beta = -0.54$, $p = .161$; ordinariness $\times$ awareness²: $\beta = -0.59$, $p = .192$) (Model 11, $R^2 = .239$, $p = .010$).

A marginal trend appeared in the vote intention model, where the interaction between ordinariness and awareness² approached significance ($\beta = -0.64$, $p = .058$), with a similar trend observed for intimacy/immediacy ($\beta = -0.47$, $p = .069$). These patterns suggest that authenticity cues may be more persuasive among moderately aware individuals. However, the lack of statistical significance precludes strong conclusions (Model 12, $R^2 = .256$, $p = .011$). Overall, the data better support H4c, indicating that political awareness does not meaningfully condition the impact of authenticity cues.

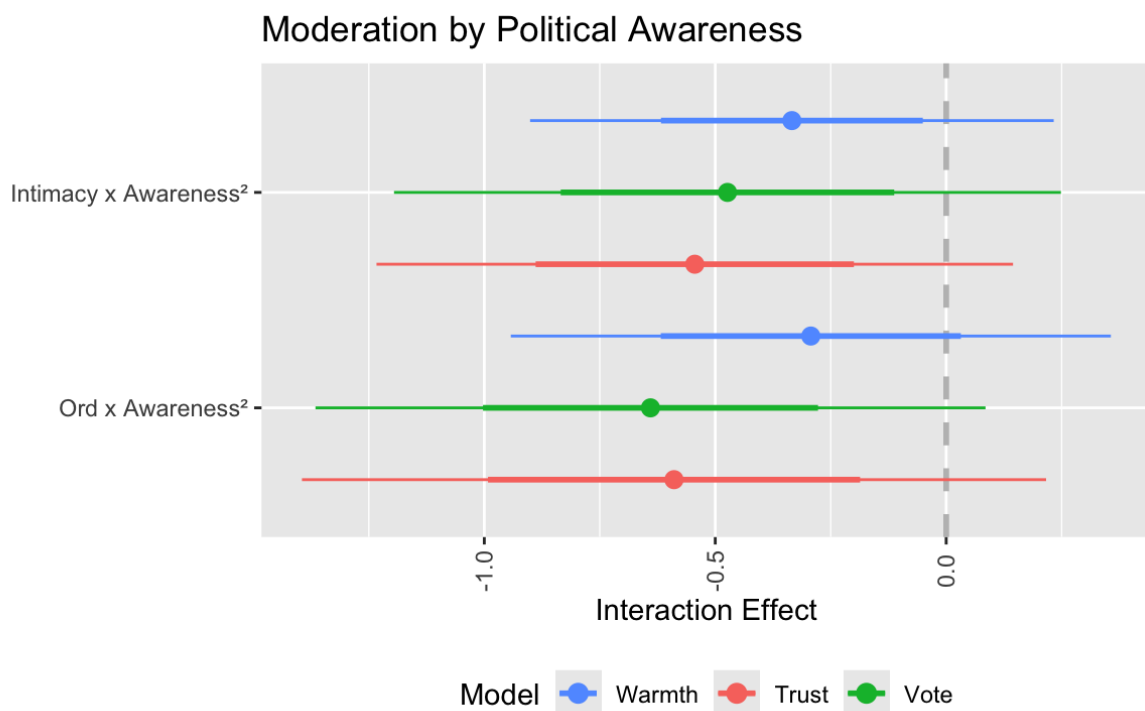


Figure 10. *Interaction Effects of Treatment and Political Awareness on Main Outcomes*

Exploratory Analyses

To extend the investigation beyond the primary hypotheses, a series of exploratory models was estimated to examine whether the level of political interest among participants moderated the effects of authenticity cues. These analyses aimed to identify additional factors that might explain why

the treatment affected some people more than others – especially since earlier research shows that political interest strongly influences how people think about and respond to political information (Lachat, 2015; Luskin, 1990).

In the warmth model, neither treatment significantly interacted with political interest. Specifically, the interaction between ordinariness and political interest was negative but not significant ($\beta = -0.19$, $p = .326$), as was the interaction for the intimacy/immediacy condition ($\beta = -0.05$, $p = .836$) (Model 13, $R^2 = .226$, $p = .005$). These findings suggest that the degree of political interest did not affect participants' emotional responses to either form of authenticity appeal.

A similar pattern emerged in the political trust model. Once again, interaction effects failed to reach statistical significance for the ordinariness treatment ($\beta = -0.37$, $p = .205$) and the intimacy/immediacy treatment ($\beta = -0.34$, $p = .282$) (Model 14, $R^2 = .226$, $p = .009$). This indicates that trust-related responses to authenticity cues were largely stable across varying levels of political interest.

Finally, the vote intention model also revealed no significant moderation by political interest. The interaction estimates for the ordinariness treatment ($\beta = -0.23$, $p = .351$) and the intimacy/immediacy treatment ($\beta = -0.21$, $p = .520$) were statistically indistinguishable from zero (Model 15, $R^2 = .211$, $p = .029$).

Overall, these additional analyses show no clear evidence that political interest affects how people respond to signs of authenticity in politics. The consistency of null interactions across all three outcome variables suggests that the effectiveness of these treatments does not depend on respondents' level of political engagement or attention. These results reinforce earlier findings from the political awareness analyses and suggest that authenticity signals are received relatively uniformly across engagement levels, at least within the scope of this study.

Discussion

This study provides empirical support for the claim that emotionally expressive displays of political authenticity can positively influence how voters evaluate candidates. Although the effects were modest, they were consistent: Candidates who displayed emotional intimacy and immediacy were perceived as warmer and, to a lesser extent, more trustworthy. These impressions were formed even in the absence of partisan cues or policy content, suggesting that emotional displays can influence political judgment in environments with little information and a strong focus on image (Enli, 2015; Fiske et al., 2007; Luebke, 2021).

Strikingly, these effects were consistent across ideological orientations, levels of political awareness, and interest. These findings support the idea that emotionally grounded authenticity serves as a broadly accessible heuristic, or shortcut, that allows voters to evaluate a candidate's character and emotional presence without requiring detailed political knowledge (e.g., Georgarakis, 2021; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Zaller, 1992).

At the same time, the lack of impact on voting intentions highlights an important limitation: Positive emotional impressions do not automatically translate into political behavior. This finding is consistent with broader research indicating that vote choice is influenced by enduring factors such as party identification, policy preferences, and candidate viability (Dalton, 2014; Kenny et al., 2021). While emotional resonance may open the door, repeated exposure, message reinforcement, or substantive policy cues are often necessary to sustain long-term political engagement.

Theoretically, these findings contribute to the growing body of literature that conceptualizes political authenticity as a strategic and performative act shaped by media environments, cultural expectations, and audience perceptions (Enli, 2015; Fordahl, 2018; Shane, 2018). Specifically, on social media platforms such as Instagram, where visual immediacy, narrative coherence, and emotional tone often outweigh detailed political ideas, authenticity becomes an act performed by candidates and evaluated by viewers based on the context in which it's shared.

The results have important practical implications for political communication, especially in election campaigns. The results suggest that candidates can leverage social media strategically to craft authentic public personas by sharing messages that highlight emotional sincerity and personal presence, rather than relying solely on policy content or partisan narratives. Particularly in what is often described as an "age of political distrust" (Dalton, 2004; Rosanvallon, 2008), the broad appeal of authenticity may offer candidates a valuable way to reconnect with the public.

However, the fact that authenticity is largely a matter of performance also raises concerns. Since candidates can carefully control how they appear, authenticity can become a powerful tool in the wrong hands. Populist leaders, for example, have shown how to use authenticity to circumvent institutional norms and present themselves as the sole voice of the people (Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017; Müller, 2017). Thus, while authenticity may foster a sense of warmth and trust toward the candidate, it also carries risks, especially when used to cultivate emotional loyalty at the expense of democratic discourse.

Moreover, it is important to note that the effectiveness of these appeals is not guaranteed. While previous research has highlighted the wide appeal of authenticity, particularly in populist communication (e.g., Enli & Rosenberg, 2018; Mudde & Kaltwasser, 2017), the findings of this study

suggest that cultural norms, institutional expectations, and the perceived credibility of the performance all play crucial roles in shaping how authenticity is received. What resonates in one political or cultural context may fall flat – or even backfire – in another. Therefore, scholars and political practitioners should move beyond one-size-fits-all approaches. Instead, they should develop context-sensitive theories of authenticity that account for differences in media environments, political culture, and audience expectations.

In sum, this study shows that emotional authenticity, when performed effectively, can enhance positive interpersonal impressions across a diverse public. In a political environment increasingly shaped by emotion and media, such performances may be a valuable tool for reconnecting with disengaged or distrustful voters – provided the performances are authentic both in appearance and in their resonance with audience expectations and cultural norms.

Limitations

Although this study offers new insights into how authenticity is performed in political communication, it has limitations that should be acknowledged to put its contributions into context and guide future research.

First, the modest and demographically skewed sample size limits the generalizability of the results. The sample size was small, and it was disproportionately composed of centrist-to-left-leaning participants, which may have shaped how authenticity cues were received and evaluated. The overrepresentation of progressive respondents, in particular, may have dampened certain treatment effects or influenced responsiveness in ways diverging from those of the broader electorate. This is particularly relevant in Germany's party-centered proportional electoral system, where progressive voters tend to prioritize professional competence and policy expertise over personal or emotional appeals (Dalton et al., 2000; Farrand & Farrand, 2021; Holtz-Bacha et al., 2014). Thus, they may be less responsive to performative displays of ordinariness or emotional immediacy. Future research would benefit from larger, more ideologically and demographically balanced samples drawn through stratified or quota sampling across diverse political systems to better capture how authenticity operates within distinct institutional and cultural settings.

Second, while the use of a fictional candidate and AI-generated Instagram posts enhanced internal validity, it reduced ecological realism. Authenticity is rarely judged in isolation; real-world perceptions evolve through repeated exposure to candidates' biographies, ideologies, and media portrayals (Enli, 2015; Luebke, 2021). Evaluating authenticity from a single decontextualized post, particularly in the image-and-caption condition, likely constrained participants' ability to form nuanced or realistic impressions. While introducing real politicians as stimuli would enhance external

validity, it would also reintroduce confounding variables, such as name recognition, affective polarization, and preexisting attitudes (e.g., Brewer et al., 2014). Future studies might consider hybrid designs that offer participants richer background information about the political candidate, such as their personal history, political stance, and sociocultural context, while controlling for potential bias.

Third, the study's ability to assess ideological moderation was limited by the ideological neutrality of the candidate stimulus. While participants' ideological self-placement was measured and used in interaction models, the candidate lacked any explicit ideological cues. This design choice was essential for isolating the main effects of authenticity dimensions but constrained the ability to draw causal inferences about how authenticity interacts with partisanship. Although the analysis hinted at asymmetries consistent with motivated reasoning, these patterns cannot be conclusively interpreted without varying the candidate's authenticity cues and ideological profile. Future research should follow Green et al.'s (2010) recommendation to implement "dual experiments" that manipulate both the treatment and the candidate's ideological alignment. This would allow for a more precise test of how authenticity interacts with partisanship in shaping political evaluations.

Fourth, this study examined two dimensions of authenticity – ordinariness and intimacy/immediacy – as defined by Luebke (2021). While these dimensions are conceptually central and empirically tractable, they do not capture the full, multidimensional nature of political authenticity. Important components, such as consistency over time and confessional self-disclosure, were not included (Enli, 2015; Luebke & Engelmann, 2022). Omitting these dimensions may have narrowed the conceptual bandwidth of the authenticity construct, potentially underrepresenting its full persuasive potential. Future studies should explore broader conceptualizations of authenticity and test how different authentic traits resonate across audience and candidate profiles.

Conclusion

This study provides timely, theoretically grounded insights into the perception and strategic use of political authenticity within the visual and performative realm of social media. By experimentally isolating two core dimensions – intimacy/immediacy and ordinariness – the study advances existing scholarship, demonstrating that authenticity functions as a communicative strategy for political figures and as a heuristic shortcut for voters navigating informational uncertainty (Enli, 2015; Luebke, 2021; Wood et al., 2016).

The findings reveal that emotionally intimate and immediate self-presentation significantly enhances perceptions of warmth and trustworthiness. Thus, emotional authenticity emerges as a powerful affective cue capable of influencing voter impressions in environments with limited information. However, the limited influence of emotional cues on voting intention serves as a critical

reminder that while these cues can deepen personal resonance, they do not easily translate into concrete political behavior, particularly in the absence of traditional partisan and policy anchors (Kenny et al., 2021; Popkin, 1991).

Notably, the emotional dimension of authenticity seems to cut across traditional ideological boundaries. Its persuasive effects are consistent across different levels of political interest, awareness, and partisan orientation. This suggests that certain emotional signals, particularly those communicated through visual and informal formats, may operate as broadly accessible heuristics. Yet, this cross-cutting appeal has its limits. The minimal impact of ordinariness cues indicates that relatability alone is not universally compelling. Its resonance is mediated by cultural norms and audience expectations.

From a strategic communication perspective, these findings highlight a critical shift: in an era where political engagement is increasingly filtered through digital and visual platforms, affective storytelling and emotionally resonant content are becoming central tools of persuasion. While traditional political communication remains anchored in issue advocacy and ideological alignment, this study highlights the growing power of informal, personal, and symbolically rich self-presentation in shaping public perception (Luebke & Engelmann, 2022; Valgarðsson et al., 2024).

Taken as a whole, this study frames authenticity as a relational and strategic performance – co-produced by political actors, shaped by the affordances of digital media, and interpreted by audiences in real time – rather than as a stable personal trait. From this perspective, authenticity emerges as a contested, context-dependent resource that reflects the deeper tensions of being visible, persuasive, and accountable in a democratic society.

Nowadays, democratic actors must not only appear “real,” but also demonstrate credibility in ways that resonate emotionally, satisfy institutional expectations, and sustain public trust in polarized, fast-paced media environments. This requires more than reactive messaging. It requires careful planning, an understanding of how digital platforms work, and a broader view of political engagement that recognizes authenticity as a means of communication and a democratic value.

Ultimately, this study reveals that authenticity is a double-edged force in modern politics. While some view it as a meaningful heuristic for evaluating important leadership traits such as sincerity, others caution that authenticity risks becoming mere performance, detached from substantive commitments or deliberative norms (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Parry-Giles, 2001). In either case, authenticity remains a powerful – if ambivalent – force in modern politics. It challenges us to reconsider how credibility, persuasion, and emotional resonance are constructed in the digital age, as well as the implications of these shifts for the future of democratic representation. Thus,

understanding authenticity's role in modern politics is not only an academic concern but also a democratic imperative.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Pilot Data, Manipulation Checks, Descriptives, Factor Analyses, and Main Effects

Table A1. The effects of treatments on perceived authenticity (Pilot Test 1)

		Perceived Authenticity - Manipulation Check	
		Ordinariness	Intimacy/ Immediacy
<i>Treatment Group 1: Ordinariness</i>			
ATE		0.060	0.152
(SE)		(0.119)	(0.089)
<i>p-value</i>		<i>0.617</i>	<i>0.096</i>
Intercept		0.593	0.593
(SE)		(0.068)	(0.068)
Covariates		No	No
N		45	45
<i>Treatment Group 2: Intimacy/Immediacy</i>			
ATE		0.153	0.164
(SE)		(0.115)	(0.089)
<i>p-value</i>		<i>0.189</i>	<i>0.072</i>
Intercept		0.324	0.324
(SE)		(0.062)	(0.062)
Covariates		No	No
N		45	45
<i>Treatment Group 3: Ordinariness x Intimacy/Immediacy</i>			
ATE		0.103	0.157
(SE)		(0.108)	(0.071)
<i>p-value</i>		<i>0.345</i>	<i>0.032</i>
Intercept		0.487	0.487
(SE)		(0.056)	(0.056)

Covariates		No	No
N		46	46

Note: Average Treatment Effects (ATE) are estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions without covariate adjustment. The reported standard errors are HC2 heteroskedasticity-consistent robust standard errors. The p-values are based on two-tailed tests. All outcome variables (Ordinariness Index, Intimacy Index, and Combined Authenticity Index) are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Table A2. Exploratory factor analysis of perceived authenticity (Pilot Test 1)

	Factor Analysis of Perceived Authenticity			
	Ordinar iness	Intimacy/ Immedia cy		
Ordinariness Items				
The politician is down-to-earth.	0.363			
The politician is not aloof.	0.564			
The politician talks in a way that makes me feel familiar with him.	0.555			
The politician resembles people you would meet walking down the street.	1.016			
Intimacy/Immediacy Items				

The politician speaks openly and honestly about his life.			0.506	
The politician shares private thoughts, opinions, and feelings.			1.004	
The politician allows others into his private life.		0.581	0.327	
The politician often acts emotionally.		0.301		
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>		0.737	0.653	

Note: Entries are factor loadings from an exploratory factor analysis using oblimin rotation. Only loadings greater than 0.30 are displayed. Cronbach's Alpha refers to the standardized scale reliability for each factor.

Table A3. The effects of treatments on perceived authenticity (Pilot Test 2)

		Perceived Authenticity - Manipulation Check	
		Ordinariness	Intimacy/Immediacy
<i>Treatment Group 1: Ordinariness</i>			
ATE		0.187	0.238
(SE)		(0.111)	(0.081)
<i>p-value</i>		0.100	0.005
Intercept		0.324	0.324
(SE)		(0.067)	(0.067)
Covariates		No	No
N		47	47
<i>Treatment Group 2: Intimacy/Immediacy</i>			

ATE		0.106	0.313
(SE)		(0.132)	(0.102)
<i>p-value</i>		<i>0.425</i>	<i>0.004</i>
Intercept		0.255	0.255
(SE)		(0.087)	(0.087)
Covariates		No	No
N		46	46
<i>Treatment Group 3: Ordinariness x Intimacy/Immediacy</i>			
ATE		0.165	0.316
(SE)		(0.114)	(0.083)
<i>p-value</i>		<i>0.155</i>	<i>0.0004</i>
Intercept		0.303	0.303
(SE)		(0.071)	(0.071)
Covariates		No	No
N		48	48

Note: Average Treatment Effects (ATE) are estimated using ordinary least squares (OLS) regressions without covariate adjustment. The reported standard errors are HC2 heteroskedasticity-consistent robust standard errors. The *p-values* are based on two-tailed tests. All outcome variables (Ordinariness Index, Intimacy Index, and Combined Authenticity Index) are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Table A4. Exploratory factor analysis of perceived authenticity (Pilot Test 2)

		Factor Analysis of Perceived Authenticity		
		Ordinar iness	Intimacy/ Immedia cy	
Ordinariness Items				
The politician is down-to-earth.		0.684		

The politician is not out of touch.		0.735			
The politician talks in a way that makes me feel familiar with him.		0.463		0.414	
The politician resembles people you would meet walking down the street.		0.343		0.370	
Intimacy/Immediacy Items					
The politician speaks openly and honestly about his life.				0.671	
The politician shares private thoughts, opinions, and feelings.				0.671	
The politician allows others into his private life.				0.969	
The politician often makes decisions based on gut feeling.		-0.351		0.639	
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>		0.762		0.797	

Note: Entries are factor loadings from an exploratory factor analysis using oblimin rotation. Only loadings greater than 0.30 are displayed. Cronbach's Alpha refers to the standardized scale reliability for each factor. To better align the manipulation check with the construct, the item "The politician is not aloof" (q19_2) was rephrased as "The politician is not out of touch." In addition, the item "The politician often acts emotionally" (q20_4) was rewritten as "The politician often makes decisions based on gut feeling."

Table A5. Summary statistics of baseline covariates (Main Study)

		Summary Statistics of Baseline Covariates					
		Placebo		Ordinarines s		Intimacy/ Immediacy	
Female		0.477 (0.505)		0.724 (0.455)		0.594 (0.499)	
Age		0.336 (0.275)		0.263 (0.271)		0.256 (0.234)	
Education		0.534 (0.206)		0.435 (0.266)		0.463 (0.239)	
Political Interest		0.627 (0.222)		0.588 (0.238)		0.571 (0.247)	
Ideology		0.537 (0.269)		0.456 (0.265)		0.488 (0.266)	
Political Awareness		0.581 (0.150)		0.511 (0.165)		0.517 (0.197)	

Note: Entries are mean values of baseline covariates and the respective standard deviations in parentheses. All variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1. Political awareness is the average of standardized education and political interest.

Table A6. Table of balance test (Main Study)

		Balance on Baseline Covariates					
		T _{ORDI} – Placebo			T _{INTI} – Placebo		
		Difference	<i>p-value</i>		Difference	<i>p-value</i>	
Female		0.247	0.034		0.116	0.321	
Age		-0.074	0.248		-0.080	0.176	
Education		-0.099	0.089		-0.071	0.173	
Political Interest		-0.040	0.462		-0.057	0.298	
Ideology		-0.081	0.198		-0.049	0.436	
Political Awareness		-0.070	0.063		-0.064	0.122	

Note: T_{ORDI} refers to the Ordinariness treatment, and T_{INTI} refers to the Intimacy/Immediacy treatment. Values represent mean differences in baseline covariates between each treatment group and the control condition. p -values are based on two-sample t -tests. All variables are rescaled to range from 0 to 1.

Table A7. Exploratory factor analysis of perceived authenticity dimensions (Control Group Only) (Main Study)

	Factor Analysis of Perceived Authenticity Dimensions			
	Ordinar iness	Intimacy/ Immedia cy		
Ordinariness Items				
The politician is down-to-earth.	0.649			
The politician talks in a way that makes me feel familiar with him.	0.720			
The politician resembles people you would meet walking down the street.	0.861			
Intimacy/Immediacy Items				
The politician speaks openly and honestly about his life.		0.778		
The politician shares private thoughts, opinions, and feelings.		0.785		

The politician allows others into his private life.			1.017	
<i>Cronbach's Alpha</i>		0.788	0.913	

Note: Entries are factor loadings from an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) with oblimin rotation and ML extraction. Loadings above 0.4 are shown in bold. Cronbach's alpha (standardized) is reported for each subscale. The two factors are moderately correlated ($r = 0.64$).

Table A8. The effects of treatments on perceived authenticity dimensions (Manipulation Check) (Main Study)

		Perceived Authenticity Dimensions - Manipulation Check (1)			
		Ordinariness		Intimacy/Immediacy	
<i>Treatment Group 1: Ordinarity</i>					
ATE		0.191		0.101	
(SE)		(0.048)		(0.050)	
<i>p-value</i>		<0.001		0.046	
Intercept		0.419		0.419	
(SE)		(0.035)		(0.035)	
Covariates		No		No	
N		100		100	
<i>Treatment Group 2: Intimacy/Immediacy</i>					
ATE		0.325		0.344	
(SE)		(0.056)		(0.067)	
<i>p-value</i>		<0.001		<0.001	
Intercept		0.231		0.231	
(SE)		(0.036)		(0.036)	
Covariates		No		No	

N		97		97	
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Note: Average Treatment Effects (ATE) are estimated using OLS regressions without covariates. The reported models correspond to manipulation checks for perceived authenticity, with robust standard errors (HC2) shown in parentheses. The control group serves as the reference category. *p*-values are based on two-tailed *t*-tests. All outcome variables are standardized to range from 0 to 1.

Table A9. The effects of treatments on combined perceived authenticity (continued Manipulation Check) (Main Study)

		Combined Perceived Authenticity - Manipulation Check (2)	
		Combined Authenticity	
<i>Treatment Group 1: Ordinarity</i>			
ATE		0.290	
(SE)		(0.052)	
<i>p</i> -value		<0.001	
Intercept		0.387	
(SE)		(0.037)	
Covariates		No	
N		100	
<i>Treatment Group 2: Intimacy/Immediacy</i>			
ATE		0.242	
(SE)		(0.056)	
<i>p</i> -value		<0.001	
Intercept		0.387	
(SE)		(0.037)	
Covariates		No	
N		100	

***Note:** Average Treatment Effects (ATE) are estimated from OLS regressions predicting combined perceived authenticity, defined as the average of standardized ordinariness and intimacy scores. Robust standard errors (HC2) are shown in parentheses. The control group is the reference category. p-values are based on two-tailed t-tests. All outcome variables are standardized to range from 0 to 1.*

Table A10. The effects of treatments on political evaluations (Main Study)

		Political Evaluations - Main Effects					
		Warmth		Trust		Vote Intention	
<i>Treatment Group 1: Ordinariness</i>							
ATE		-0.059		-0.051		-0.063	
(SE)		(0.052)		(0.064)		(0.054)	
<i>p-value</i>		<i>0.256</i>		<i>0.425</i>		<i>0.242</i>	
95% CIs		[-0.16, 0.05]		[-0.18, 0.08]		[-0.18, 0.05]	
Covariates		Yes		Yes		Yes	
N		101		94		87	
<i>Treatment Group 2: Intimacy/Immediacy</i>							
ATE		0.105		0.158		0.056	
(SE)		(0.053)		(0.062)		(0.072)	
<i>p-value</i>		<i>0.050</i>		<i>0.013</i>		<i>0.443</i>	
95% CIs		[0.004, 0.21]		[0.03, 0.28]		[-0.07, 0.19]	
Covariates		Yes		Yes		Yes	
N		101		94		87	

***Note:** Average Treatment Effects (ATE) are OLS coefficients from covariate-adjusted models that control for gender, age, political interest, and education. Robust standard errors (HC2) are shown in parentheses. The control group serves as the reference category. Reported p-values are based on two-tailed t-tests. Confidence intervals are at the 95% level. All outcome variables are standardized to range from 0 to 1.*

Appendix B: Heterogeneous effects

Table B1. The heterogeneous effects of authenticity cues on political evaluations by political predispositions (Interaction Models) (Main Study)

		Heterogeneous Effects of Authenticity Cues							
		across levels of:							
		Ideology		Political Awareness		Political Interest			
		F-value	<i>p-value</i>	F-value	<i>p-value</i>	F-value	<i>p-value</i>		
Warmth		1.602	0.207	0.767	0.468	0.347	0.708		
Trust		1.150	0.322	1.574	0.214	1.169	0.316		
Vote									
Intention		0.188	0.829	1.703	0.189	0.483	0.619		

Note: Entries are *F*-values. The *p*-values are based on two-tailed tests using randomization inference. Statistically significant heterogeneous effects (at the 0.05 level) are shown in bold. Political interest was included as an exploratory moderator. All outcome and moderator variables are standardized to range from 0 to 1

Appendix C: Experimental Stimulus Materials



Thomas Schneider My political journey did not begin on a political stage, but at the dinner table. Honest conversations over shared meals taught me to trust my feelings and lead with heart. Thank you to my family - your support has shaped every step of this campaign. As I stand here today as Prime Minister, I also owe it to you. 🧡

#Gratitude #Family #StateElection



Thomas Schneider Mein politischer Weg begann nicht auf der politischen Bühne, sondern am Esstisch. Ehrliche Gespräche beim gemeinsamen Essen haben mich gelehrt, meinen Gefühlen zu vertrauen und mit dem Herzen zu führen. Danke an meine Familie – eure Unterstützung hat jeden Schritt dieses Wahlkampfes geprägt. Dass ich heute als Ministerpräsident hier stehe, verdanke ich auch euch. 🧡

#Dankbarkeit #Familie #Landtagswahl



Figure 1. *Instagram post – Intimacy & Immediacy condition (English version)*

Figure 2. *Instagram post – Intimacy & Immediacy condition (German version)*



Thomas Schneider · Follow



Thomas Schneider Stopped by Denis's just before the coalition talks. Went for the full-on beef kebab, extra spicy, with all the toppings, because let's be real: negotiating on an empty stomach is a rookie move. Took one bite and nearly spilled yoghurt sauce all over my notes. Thankfully, Denis had napkins ready. 🤤🍴🔥

#MyManDenis #BeefBeforeCompromise
#DönerDiplomacy

Figure 3. *Instagram post – Ordinarity condition (English version)*



Thomas Schneider · Follow



Thomas Schneider Kurz vor den Koalitionsverhandlungen noch mal bei Denis vorbeigeschaut. Kalbsdöner, extra scharf, mit allem, weil mal ehrlich: Wer hungrig verhandelt, hat eh schon verloren. Beim ersten Biss fast die Joghurtsoße über meine Unterlagen gekippt. Zum Glück hatte Denis Servietten griffbereit. 🤤🍴🔥

#MeinMannDenis #KalbVorKompromiss
#DönerDiplomatie

Figure 4. *Instagram post – Ordinarity condition (German version)*

 **Thomas Schneider** · Follow



Thomas Schneider Food security begins on our plates. It's about more than food availability - it's about equitable access, resilient supply chains and sustainable agriculture. Even at the state level, Minister Presidents have a responsibility to ensure the reliable availability of high-quality, healthy food.

#FoodSecurity #FoodSupply #SustainableAgriculture

 **Thomas Schneider** · Follow



Thomas Schneider Ernährungssicherheit fängt auf unseren Tellern an. Es geht um mehr als die Verfügbarkeit von Nahrungsmitteln – es geht um gerechten Zugang, widerstandsfähige Versorgungsketten und nachhaltige Landwirtschaft. Auch auf Landesebene tragen die Ministerpräsidenten Verantwortung dafür, dass hochwertige und gesunde Lebensmittel verlässlich verfügbar bleiben.

#Ernährungssicherheit #Lebensmittelversorgung
#NachhaltigeLandwirtschaft

Figure 5. *Instagram post – Control condition (English version)*

Figure 6. *Instagram post – Control condition (German version)*