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Mapping Right-Wing Populist and Conspiracist Content on
Telegram
RPC-Lex Scores and Engagement in AfD Politicians' Posts During
the 2025 Election Campaign

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1 Introduction

With the rise of social media and instant messaging services, the conditions under which political communication takes place have fundamentally changed. Contemporary election campaigns no longer unfold in a media environment confined to party events, parliaments, televised debates, and traditional news coverage. Political communication increasingly occurs across platform-specific digital environments in which actors address audiences directly, circulate interpretations of events in real time, and compete for visibility under communicative conditions that differ from those of both traditional media and mainstream social media. Platform design, governance structures, visibility logics and the use of algorithms therefore shape how political messages are produced, distributed, interpreted, and received (see, similarly, Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2022, pp. 72–73; Simon et al., 2023, pp. 3054–3055).

The social media and instant messaging service Telegram has emerged as a particularly relevant case in this regard. By combining elements of messenger communication, public broadcasting, and networked circulation under comparatively weak moderation, Telegram offers political actors distinctive opportunities for direct audience engagement and rapid message dissemination (see Rogers, 2020, pp. 214–217; Simon et al., 2023, pp. 3055–3058; Willaert, 2023, pp. 1–4). This thesis examines these dynamics through the case of the Alternative für Deutschland's (from here on AfD, Alternative for Germany) party and politicians public Telegram channels during the 2025 German Bundestag campaign. The introduction outlines the problem, relevance, and research gap of the study, explains the case selection, introduces the research questions and hypotheses and situates the thesis within the broader field of digital political communication research.

1.1 Problem, Relevance and Research Gap

On February 23, 2025, Germany's Bundestag election produced a result that rendered the changed landscape of German politics difficult to ignore. With 20.8 % of the second vote and 152 seats, the AfD became the second-strongest party in the new Bundestag, behind the CDU with 22.6 % and 164 seats (*Ergebnisse Deutschland - Die Bundeswahlleiterin*, 2025). What had long been discussed as a gradual normalization of far-right politics in Europe presented itself in Germany not as a fleeting protest episode, but as the continued consolidation of a party that has moved to the center of political conflict and discussion.

This development is noteworthy because Germany had long appeared to be a “latecomer” to electoral success of far-right parties (Weisskircher, 2025, pp. 152–155). For decades, the Federal Republic was regarded as an exception compared to the rest of Western

Europe. The rise of the AfD, conversely, marked the delayed national breakthrough of a far-right party. In this context, Weisskircher concludes that “today the AfD is the focal point in Germany’s far-right scene” (Weisskircher, 2025, p. 155).

The emergence of the AfD is situated within a broader transnational shift. Mudde conceptualizes this as the “fourth wave” of far-right parties, characterized by growing electoral strength and increasing political normalization of far-right actors across Europe (Mudde, 2019, pp. 28–30; Weisskircher, 2025, p. 155). Mudde (2019, p. 29) links this wave to three crises of the twenty-first century: the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the Great Recession of 2008, and the “refugee crisis” of 2015. Since Mudde’s publication, further overlapping crises – including the COVID-19 pandemic, wars on Ukraine, Palestine, and recently Iran, and continuing geopolitical and economic instability – have deepened social uncertainty and political distrust, thereby creating conditions that strengthen far-right mobilization and antagonistic political communication.

These dynamics are especially consequential in contemporary media environments. As Mudde argues, the relationship between the far right and the media is fundamentally ambivalent: most traditional media outlets do not share far right politics and often even regard the far right as a threat to democracy, yet far-right politics are highly newsworthy because they generate conflict, provocation, and spectacle. Media coverage can therefore unintentionally amplify far-right agendas and contribute to their normalization (Mudde, 2019, pp. 94–96). The fourth wave of far-right politics has also coincided with the rise of social media, which allows far-right actors to bypass traditional media gatekeepers and insert themselves more directly into public debates. Mudde (2019, p. 96) further notes that many far-right parties and politicians have recognized the disruptive potential of social media and have also become highly adept at using its communicative logic.

Research likewise shows that the communicative opportunity structures of social media are especially conducive to populist radical right messaging. Schumann et al. (2021, pp. 923–924), similarly to Mudde, argue that these platforms enable actors to address large audiences directly and at relatively low cost while reducing dependence on traditional gatekeepers. At the same time, “the conflict-driven, emotional, and simplified style of populist radical right communication is especially compatible with the attention economy of social media” (Schumann et al., 2021, pp. 923–924). Such communication frequently reduces complex social phenomena to seemingly simple antagonistic scenarios structured around the confrontative conceptualization of ‘us versus them’, mobilizes fear and anger, presents the future in bleak terms, and attributes responsibility for negative developments to elites and

non-native out-groups (Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 746; Hameleers et al., 2017, p. 872; Mudde, 2019, p. 95; Schumann et al., 2021, p. 923).

Researchers highlight that populism is often connected to conspiracist thinking, and not incidentally. Van Prooijen (2018, pp. 86–92) conceptualizes populism as a political mentality structured by anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, and threatened nationalism, and argues that these same dimensions also help explain why conspiracy narratives flourish, especially in contexts where a distrusted elite and threatening out-groups are imagined as acting against a vulnerable in-group. In a linguistic study, Römer and Stumpf present similarities between the two phenomena in their analysis of conspiracy-related narratives in the communication of the AfD party and its politicians. They argue that conspiracist thinking is not isolated to certain members of the party, but forms a central ideological component of the party discourse (Römer & Stumpf, 2019, p. 140). For the present study, this overlap is equally analytically significant, because it suggests that right-wing populist and conspiracist communication should be treated as analytically distinguishable but frequently intersecting patterns (see also Puschmann et al., 2022, p. 1145; Rinsdorf et al., 2024, p. 143).

This conceptual overlap is reflected in the methodology of RPC-Lex, a dictionary developed by Puschmann et al. (2022, pp. 1145, 1149–1150, 1162), to examine German right-wing populist conspiracy discourse online. Rather than treating populist and conspiracist communication as separate phenomena, RPC-Lex is designed to capture their intersection and recurring intertwining through thirteen theoretically derived categories, including anti-elitism, nationalism, protest/rebellion, suspicion/manipulation, conspiracy, exposure/revelation, antisemitism, and apocalypse/downfall. Thus, the lexicon provides a theory-based instrument for tracing the recurring combination of both phenomena across large corpora of German-language online texts.

In this thesis, I use “far-right” as an umbrella term for the politics of the AfD and its broader communicative environment, because this label better captures ideological heterogeneity and internal variation than narrower labels alone (see, similarly, Gong, 2025, pp. 1–2; Pirro, 2023; Weisskircher, 2025, p. 153; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023, p. 2). When referring specifically to RPC-Lex, however, I use the term “right-wing”, since this is the terminology used by the dictionary and its corresponding methodological framework (Puschmann et al., 2022, p. 1145). Following Puschmann et al. (2022, p. 1145), I also use the term “conspiracy discourse” when referring to the communicative form of conspiracist ideas, because it emphasizes the communicative form through which such ideas are articulated, circulated, and developed.

Among the digital environments in which far-right and conspiracy-related discourse circulate, Telegram deserves particular attention. Research shows that stricter moderation on mainstream platforms has contributed to the growth of less moderated spaces, such as Telegram (Simon et al., 2023, pp. 3054–3057). Telegram became attractive because it combines visibility, archiving, forwarding, and comparatively permissive governance in ways that are useful for actors seeking both publicity and relative infrastructural protection from deplatforming (Rogers, 2020, pp. 214–217; Urman & Katz, 2022, p. 907; Willaert, 2023, pp. 1–4). Rogers defines ‘deplatforming’ as the removal of social media accounts or groups for violating platform rules. He argues that this has particularly affected far-right and extremist actors, often reducing their visibility and weakening their follower networks, encouraging migration to alternative platforms such as Telegram which offer more permissive content governance (Rogers, 2020, pp. 213–217).

In the German-speaking context, Telegram has been described as a platform that facilitates the spread of content, the formation of topic-centered communities, and the communicative construction of counterpublic formations, especially among radicalized actors who no longer place trust in the government and the state (known as *Staatskeptiker* in German) (Rinsdorf et al., 2024, pp. 131–137). Comparative research likewise suggests that Telegram functions as one of the central platforms for the most radical and active communities within German far-right online ecologies (Gong, 2025, pp. 2–4; Kiess, 2025, pp. 640–641; Schulze et al., 2022, p. 1104).

Taken together, the literature demonstrates that Telegram is a particularly relevant environment for examining contentious campaign communication at the intersection of populism, conspiracy narratives, and digital mobilization.

Although campaign communication is a well-established field, and related research on Telegram is growing rapidly, the existing literature remains fragmented, which defines the present research gap. Existing studies have examined Telegram’s network structures, information flows, community formation, and users’ perspectives on community building (Bader et al., 2025), radicalization dynamics in German-speaking Telegram groups (Schulze et al., 2022), platform-specific affordances of Telegram, particularly narration, chronology, and forwarding practices (Peeters & Willaert, 2022; Willaert, 2023), and migration to Telegram in the context of deplatforming (Rogers, 2020). Additionally, initial campaign-oriented research shows that Telegram can function as an informative channel, mobilization tool, and amplifier for other media content. For example, studies have examined electoral communication in Brazil (see Benevenuto & Melo, 2024; Venâncio et al., 2024) and

Catalonia (Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2022). However, few studies combine these perspectives within a single framework that links campaign communication on Telegram to systematic content measurement and exposure-adjusted engagement within the context of a German election.

1.2 Case selection

The case selection is guided by three factors: the AfD as Germany's electorally successful far-right party and a key example of a European party using populist, conspiracist discourse in its political communication, Telegram as an especially conducive platform environment for contentious communication, and the 2025 German federal election as a period of intensive strategic communication.

The AfD is a particularly relevant case because its development reflects the consolidation of the radical right in Germany. From its founding in 2013 to the present, the party evolved from a soft Eurosceptic formation into a far-right populist party. By 2017, right-wing views, anti-Islam attitudes, and anti-immigration positions had become primary motivations for supporting the AfD (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019, pp. 1–2, 15–18; Medina Serrano et al., 2019, p. 214). The AfD is situated within the “fourth wave” of far-right politics (Weisskircher, 2025, pp. 152–153), but differs from smaller adjacent actors through its electoral success. Research shows that, in 2022/23, 21 % of AfD supporters held a consistent right-extremist worldview (*geschlossen rechtsextremes Weltbild*) (Zick & Eden, 2024, p. 6).

The AfD's political communication style further justifies the case. Research links the party closely to digital media and to discursive strategies of delegitimization (Heinisch & Werner, 2019, pp. 483–485; Leschzyk, 2021, pp. 485–486; Medina Serrano et al., 2019, pp. 215–216; Römer & Stumpf, 2019, pp. 140–150). The party has achieved unusually high online visibility compared with other German parties, especially among audiences distrustful of mainstream media and traditional political communication (Bachl, 2018, p. 259; Medina Serrano et al., 2019, p. 215). Its rhetoric during the COVID-19 pandemic, in which governmental actors and institutions were systematically portrayed as untrustworthy or illegitimate, illustrates this broader pattern of delegitimization (Leschzyk, 2021, pp. 485–486).

These communication practices also highlight the convergence of populist and conspiracist elements in AfD discourse. The party combines exclusionary constructions of “the people” with distrust of the mainstream media and institutions and with narratives of hidden agendas or betrayal by elites. This presents the party as especially suitable for examining the link between populist antagonism, conspiracist messages, and anti-mainstream

communication (Bachl, 2018, p. 259; Dittrich, 2017, pp. 5–6; Heinisch & Werner, 2019, pp. 483–485; Römer & Stumpf, 2019, pp. 140–150).

Telegram is chosen as a platform, because it is not merely another social media platform on which political actors are present, but rather a distinct communication infrastructure with specific affordances for broadcasting, forwarding, maintaining relative anonymity, and networked recirculation. Gong's (2025, p. 18) comparative study of German far-right movement networks on Twitter/X, Telegram, and Gettr identifies Telegram as the central platform for the most radical and active communities and further shows that the AfD is integral to far-right social-movement networks across the studied platforms.

Lastly, the period of the 2025 German federal election campaign was selected because campaign periods condense strategic messaging, issue competition, mobilization efforts, and audience attention. For a study interested in content and audience engagement, this structured timeframe is analytically preferable to ordinary periods of party communication. It allows the analysis to examine which communicative patterns characterize AfD Telegram posts, how these patterns vary across campaign weeks, and how they relate to audience response.

1.3 Research questions, hypotheses, and short content preview

Against the background outlined above, this thesis examines the 2025 federal election campaign of the AfD as a case of platform-specific digital campaigning at the intersection of right-wing populist and conspiracist discourse, using RPC-Lex (Puschmann et al., 2022) as the principal measurement instrument. The study is guided by one main research question and one sub-question. Together, they connect the descriptive mapping of content patterns with their temporal development and their relationship to audience response within Telegram's metric environment.

1.3.1 Research Question (RQ)

Which right-wing populist and conspiracist content categories (RPC-Lex) characterize the Telegram posts of the Alternative for Germany (AfD) party and its politicians during the 2025 election campaign period?

1.3.2 Sub-Question (SQ)

How do overall RPC-Lex intensity and engagement, operationalized as reactions per view, vary across campaign weeks?

1.3.3 Hypotheses

Based on the existing literature, four hypotheses structure the analysis.

H1: Elite critique (ELIT), scandalization (SCAN), and Islam-related content (ISLA) will be among the most frequent RPC-Lex categories in the AfD's Telegram communication.

H2: Overall intensity, understood as the overall density of RPC-Lex lexical indicators in a post, will increase across campaign weeks.

H3: Higher overall intensity and higher category intensity will be associated with higher engagement per view.

H4: Channel reach will be positively associated with engagement per view, and the association between intensity and engagement will be stronger in higher-reach channels.

1.4 Structure of the thesis

The thesis is organized into six chapters. Following this introduction, Chapter two establishes the theoretical and conceptual framework. First, I examine political communication, the public sphere, and counterpublics under digital conditions, drawing in particular on Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990), Fraser (1990), Warner (2002), and Wimmer (2007). I then conceptualize populism and conspiracy discourse as communicative patterns, informed above all by Mudde (2004), Wirth et al. (2016), van Proojien (2018), and Römer and Stumpf (2019). The chapter subsequently turns to Telegram as a distinct platform environment, and strategic political communication in campaign settings.

In chapter three, I present the methodological approach and research design by explaining the case selection, the delimitation of the campaign period, the data basis, and the process of data collection and preparation. The chapter then outlines the dictionary-based content analysis using RPC-Lex, defines the key variables used in the study and specifies the operationalization of intensity, exposure-adjusted engagement, reach, and time. I conclude the chapter with the analytical strategy.

Chapter four presents the empirical findings. I begin with reporting the most prevalent and intense right-wing populist and conspiracist categories in AfD Telegram posts (linked to the RQ and H1), then turn to the main engagement model and the category-specific analyses in order to identify which forms of communication are associated with stronger reactions per view (H3). The presentation of results is thus structured to answer both the descriptive and the explanatory parts of the research design.

In chapter five, I discuss the findings in light of the theoretical framework and the broader literature on Telegram, populist far-right communication, and conspiracy discourse, and reflect on methodological limitations and future research.

The thesis concludes with chapter six, a summary of the central findings and a return to the broader question of what the AfD-affiliated public Telegram communication during the 2025 federal election campaign reveals about the intersection of platform-specific campaigning and far-right populist conspiracist discourse.

2 Theory and state of research

The communication of the AfD party and its politicians on Telegram during the 2025 election campaign cannot be understood through content alone. Rather than viewing Telegram posts as isolated texts, this chapter develops a theoretical framework for analyzing them as part of evolving public communication under digital conditions. It moves from the transformations of public communication and the public sphere to the conceptual relationship between populist and conspiracist discourse, and then to the specific characteristics of Telegram and strategic campaign communication. The goal is to review the relevant literature while establishing the theoretical foundation for the subsequent empirical interpretation of the findings.

2.1 Public communication, the public sphere, and counterpublics in the digital age

Before conceptualizing populist and conspiracist communication, it is necessary to clarify the broader concepts through which its public relevance can be understood. This subchapter therefore addresses how public communication is structured, how publics and counterpublics emerge, and how these dynamics are transformed under digital conditions.

2.1.1 *The public sphere and public communication as a system and arena*

Following Habermas, the public sphere (*Öffentlichkeit*) can be conceptualized as an open, communicative space oriented toward issues of shared social and political relevance. Its democratic significance lies in its ability to provide a space where issues can be made visible, opinions can be formed, and citizens can participate in democratic decision-making processes (Habermas, 1962/2023).

Gerhards and Neidhardt expand this normative idea into a systems-oriented model and discuss the public sphere and its central social role in the context of modern, functionally differentiated societies with distinct political functions (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990, p. 6). In their account, the public sphere functions as an intermediary system whose political role is to receive themes and opinions (*input*), process them (*throughput*), and transmit the resulting public opinions to citizens and the political system (*output*) (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990, pp. 6, 12). This perspective shifts the focus from ideal deliberation to the concrete subjects of how issues become publicly visible, how opinions are formed, and how they become politically consequential.

This intermediary role is crucial for democratic politics. Gerhards and Neidhardt stress that electoral preferences are formed in the public sphere, because citizens must observe party competition, inform themselves about publicly presented alternatives, and orient themselves toward issues and opinions that circulate there. At the same time, parties and interest groups

depend on the public sphere as the place in which they present themselves, compete for support, and attempt to persuade citizens (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990, pp. 10–11). The public sphere therefore operates as a competitive space, both alongside and between elections, in which opinions and issues are articulated, political agendas are co-defined, and claims about what should be politically addressed are advanced and contested.

Although participation is in principle open, public communication is socially structured and unequally distributed. Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990, pp. 19–25) distinguish between face-to-face encounters, public events, and the mass media, while emphasizing that in modern societies, public opinion is constituted above all through mass-mediated communication that grants issues broader social visibility. Interested actors such as parties, governments, social movements, and interest groups compete in subject-specific “arenas” to establish their issues and views as relevant and convincing to the public, while success depends on whether they can mobilize and persuade an audience. Gerhards and Neidhardt (1990, pp. 26–28) therefore describe public arenas as shaped by competition for attention, legitimacy, and interpretive authority. To influence public opinion, actors must frame issues as problems, assign causes and responsibility, and present their claims as credible and relevant to the public (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1990, pp. 37–43).

This classical model remains useful for contemporary theory, because it conceptualizes the public sphere neither as a utopian deliberative space nor as a neutral ground, but as a selective and conflictual arena in which issues, opinions, and claims are continuously negotiated. Later reconstructions likewise stress that public communication is structured through selections and deselections of what becomes publicly relevant, as well as through struggles over perceived majorities, legitimacy, and attention (Bentele & Nothhaft, 2010, pp. 114–115; Klinkhammer, 2025, pp. 10–13).

For a study interested in contentious political communication, this model provides a vocabulary for analyzing how issues are selected, how responsibility is assigned, and how public opinions form under conditions of openness, inequality, and conflict. Below, this foundational perspective is further specified by turning to publics and counterpublics.

2.1.2 Publics and counterpublics

The concept of the public sphere becomes more complex once exclusion, societal inequalities, and power are considered. Nancy Fraser’s critique of the unitary bourgeois public sphere is central here. In “Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy” (1990, pp. 66–67), she argues that in stratified societies, a single comprehensive public sphere does not guarantee equal participation. Rather,

deliberation within dominant publics tends to favor dominant groups and disadvantage subordinates. Participatory parity is therefore better approximated by a plurality of competing publics than by a singular overarching sphere.

Fraser introduces the concept of “subaltern counterpublics” as “parallel discursive arenas” in which subordinated groups create and circulate counterdiscourses that enable them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs (Fraser, 1990, pp. 66–67). These formations are not inherently virtuous or democratic in themselves, but since they arise in response to exclusions within dominant publics, they contribute to the expansion of discursive space and widen the range of publicly contestable issues (Fraser, 1990, pp. 67–68). Their significance lies in a dual orientation: they function both as spaces of withdrawal, regroupment, and internal exchange, as well as bases for interventions directed toward broader publics (Fraser, 1990, p. 68).

Warner’s theoretical framework sharpens this shift by defining publics less as stable groups than as formations constituted through discourse itself. According to Warner (2002, p. 50), a public is defined as “a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself” and “exists by virtue of being addressed” (Warner, 2002, p. 50), therefore its being held together not primarily by shared membership, territory, or institutional inclusion, but by circulation and address.

Counterpublics are predicated on a similar logic, yet they do so in a self-conscious relation to a dominant public. Warner (2002, pp. 56–58) counterpublics arise in relation to hierarchy, stigma, or exclusion. However, they do not exist outside publicness altogether but remain constituted through public circulation, address to strangers, and through mediated forms of discourse. Dominant publics often assume their discourse is both normal and universal, whereas counterpublics experience publicness as contested and often hostile. Consequently, these spaces serve as sites for the formation of alternative subjectivities, styles of speech, and forms of belonging (Warner, 2002, pp. 86–88).

Wimmer’s conceptualization is especially useful for this thesis, as the author employs a systematic approach to analyze the concept and divides it into distinct dimensions. According to Wimmer’s model, counterpublics are understood as relational formations that arise from perceived deficits in the dominant public sphere and that remain oriented toward that wider sphere even in opposition (Wimmer, 2007, pp. 243–244). Central to this is approach is counter-thematization (*Gegenthematisierung*), which involves the deliberate articulation and dissemination of issues and viewpoints that are considered absent from or suppressed by conventional publics (Wimmer, 2007, p. 157). Wimmer further highlights the

role of media, particularly alternative media, as carriers of counterpublicity that facilitate the public articulation of oppositional issues (Wimmer, 2007, p. 159). In addition, Wimmer conceptualizes counterpublics as specific forms of partial publics (*Teilöffentlichkeiten*), including anti-institutional discourse publics that develop their own communicative structures while still aiming to influence broader opinion formation. Counterpublicity thus appears not only as a discursive position, but also as a communicative practice through which participation, belonging, and collective orientation are enacted (Wimmer, 2007, pp. 160–161).

Taken together, Fraser, Warner, and Wimmer provide the foundational framework for understanding counterpublics as relational, mediated, and discursively constituted formations, whose significance lies in how they struggle for legitimacy, access and relevance, and how they position themselves against dominant publics while seeking broader visibility.

2.1.3 Counterpublics in right-wing and dissent contexts

The notion of counterpublics becomes more contested once it is applied beyond its original emancipatory contexts. Recent scholarship shows that counterpublic theory now circulates across a range of ideological settings, and is increasingly used to analyze far-right, ethno-nationalist, racist, and reactionary formations (Venema et al., 2025, pp. 8–9). Since counterpublics were originally theorized primarily in relation to leftist or progressive agendas, this expansion is controversial due to the normative history of the concept. Fraser’s concept of subaltern counterpublics addressed discursive arenas emerging from structural exclusion and allow marginalized or subordinated actors to develop counter discourses that challenge the hegemony of dominant publics (Fraser, 1990, pp. 63–65, 67). Consequently, earlier research has centered primarily on progressive and historically marginalized actors, including the labor movement, anti-racist, feminist, and LGBTQIA movements (Venema et al., 2025, p. 6; Warner, 2002, pp. 87–89).

The increasingly frequent association of counterpublics and forms of public dissent with far-right politics and regressive agendas has posed a significant challenge to long-established concepts of communication. While some scholars continue to reserve the term “counterpublics” for structurally marginalized actors, others extend it to include nationalist, racist, and reactionary formations (Venema et al., 2025, pp. 9, 20).

The analytical gain of the concept thus lies less in resolving this normative dispute than in clarifying how such actors position themselves against a perceived hegemonic mainstream and claim to speak from a place of exclusion, neglect, or censorship. This understanding is consistent with the earlier discussions of the public sphere as a contested

arena and with the counterpublic framework established by Fraser and Warner, while leaving open the normative question of whether all such formations are democratically equivalent.

In far-right and dissent contexts, counterpublicity tends to rest on the assertion that dominant publics underrepresent, misrepresent, or actively suppress important themes. Mainstream media, established politics, and expert authority are no longer treated as legitimate intermediaries, but as actors within a distorted or hegemonic order against which alternative communicative spaces must be built (Schöppl & Schwarzenegger, 2025, p. 76; Venema et al., 2025, p. 9).

At this point, the concept of counterpublicity overlaps with a broader struggle over epistemic authority. Primig (2024, pp. 490–491) conceptualizes the German coronavirus protest movement as a counter-knowledge order that does not only contest particular claims or policies, but the established order of knowledge itself by opposing expertise with counter-expertise and institutional legitimacy with claims of superior interpretive insight. Counterpublic formations thus become sites in which alternative hierarchies of credibility are built, as they are organized around the assumption that the dominant order is not merely mistaken, but fundamentally deceptive, and that alternative publics are needed to restore access to truth.

These formations are sustained not only by ideology, but also by user experience and media practice. Research shows that while alternative media are sometimes used as supplements to mainstream sources, they are sometimes used as exclusively functional equivalents, thereby creating the possibility for alternative perceptions of reality that shape a potential antagonistic understanding of the public sphere (Schöppl & Schwarzenegger, 2025, pp. 89–91).

Telegram research likewise shows that users negotiate their positions between mainstream and counterpublic information worlds in different ways, ranging from topic-oriented and exploratory uses to more strongly alienated and community-oriented appropriations (Bader et al., 2025, pp. 134, 140). Telegram has become central to counterpublic formation within German-speaking countries because it offers users ways of connecting with like-minded others, processing information collectively, and situating themselves in opposition to a world view that the users “perceive to be hegemonic” (Bader et al., 2025, pp. 145–147, 151–152).

Therefore, the conception of counterpublicity continues to offer a valuable analytical framework for understanding far-right and anti-institutional communication, even if its normative application remains debated. It captures how oppositional communication is

organized, why such actors frame themselves as neglected or silenced, why they foreground allegedly suppressed issues, and why media infrastructures outside the established mainstream become so central to their communicative practice.

2.1.4 Digital transformation of the public sphere

The digital transformation of the public sphere is best understood as a change in the conditions under which publicness is produced, circulated, and experienced. In a more recent publication, Wimmer therefore describes the public sphere as a “moving target”, arguing that rapid media and social change require a new conceptualization of public communication in increasingly virtual, individualized, and dynamic communicative spaces (Wimmer, 2017, p. 198). The key point is not that the public sphere disappears, but that the conditions under of public visibility, participation, and opinion formation becomes more complex, more layered, and less reducible to a single mass-mediated arena.

This transformation affects the architecture of publicness. Public discourse increasingly unfolds across multiple communicative spaces with distinct temporalities, audiences, and thresholds of participation. Drüecke (2017, pp. 51–53) argues that online political communication spaces are not static containers but are co-constructed through dynamic interactions that occur within them. Digital publics are therefore plural rather than singular, better understood as a differentiated field in which different communicative spaces connect, overlap, and compete.

danah boyd’s (2010, p. 39) concept of “networked publics” conceptualizes publics as the imagined collectivities that emerge through the interaction of people, technology, and practice and complements this by showing how networked technologies reshape publicness through four central affordances: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability (boyd, 2010, p. 46). These affordances alter how discourse circulates, how long it remains available, and how easily it can be detached from its original context. This, in turn, results in a transformation of the underlying architecture of visibility.

Concurrently, the digital transformation of the public sphere should not be equated with democratic renewal. Kruse et al. (2018, pp. 63–65) explicitly caution against the assumption that social media simply revitalizes the public sphere. Lower thresholds of participation may widen access, but do not inherently guarantee more democratic communication; they can also intensify fragmentation, selective exposure, and communicative inequality (Kruse et al., 2018, pp. 80–81). Digital publicness is therefore characterized by a certain degree of ambivalence. While it expands opportunities for participation and articulation, it also retains asymmetries of attention, tone, or influence.

Taken together, these approaches suggest that the digital structural transformation of the public sphere should be conceptualized as a reorganization of mediation, visibility, and articulation. Although classical public-sphere theory remains indispensable, it is supplemented by concepts that account for networked circulation, shifting spatialities of communication, and the infrastructural power of digital platforms.

2.2 Populism and conspiracy discourse as communicative patterns

The preceding subchapter established the overarching communicative framework within which political discourse unfolds. The following section turns to the concepts that guide the empirical analysis. In this thesis, populism and conspiracy discourse are approached as recurring communicative patterns rather than as fixed ideological labels or exclusively actor-centered attributes. This perspective enables an examination of how political messages generate conflict, identify opponents, allocate blame, and formulate claims regarding truth.

2.2.1 Populism as measurable communication

The conceptual foundation is Mudde's (2004, pp. 543–544) definition of populism as a “thin-centered” ideology that separates society into two homogeneous and antagonistic groups, “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite”, and holds that politics should be an expression of the “*volonté générale*” (general will) of the people. This definition remains useful because it identifies a minimal ideational core while allowing for contextual variation. As a “thin-centered” ideology, populism does not offer a comprehensive worldview or normative ideations on its own, but rather attaches itself to a wider range of political concepts (Mudde, 2004, p. 544). Although populism is present in (radical) leftist movements, it is predominantly associated with the (radical) right (Gründl, 2022, p. 1484; Mudde, 2004, p. 549; Wirth et al., 2016, p. 49).

Communication research has translated this ideational core of populism into a framework for empirical analysis. Wirth et al. (2016, pp. 5–8) conceptualize populist communication as structured by three interrelated dimensions: anti-elitism, people-centrism, and popular sovereignty (Wirth et al., 2016, pp. 48–51). Populist actors present themselves as protectors and saviors of a virtuous and monolithic “people”, the in-group with shared values, desires, and common sense, while depicting elites as corrupt, evil, or incapable. Thus, populists claim to speak on behalf of the people, mobilizing support against the elites they accuse of oppressing the masses and hold responsible for negative developments in society, all while performing closeness to “the people” and maintaining a marked distance from opponents (Bergmann, 2020, p. 253; Gadinger & Simon, 2019, p. 25; Hameleers et al., 2017, pp. 871–872; Mudde, 2004, p. 549; Wirth et al., 2016, p. 15). More generally, a

communication-centered perspective shifts the focus from what populism *is* to what it *does*, and how it is articulated in mediated settings (Sorensen, 2021, p. 3).

This theoretical framework enables the analysis of populism as a recurrent communicative pattern. Wirth et al. (2016, pp. 9–13) demonstrate that the core of populist communication can be decomposed into recurring claims about the people, the elite, and popular sovereignty, which renders it suitable for systematic content analysis. Sorensen (2021, pp. 10–11) similarly emphasizes dramatized conflict, performed directness, and staged closeness to “ordinary people” as key features. Ernst et al. (2019, p. 4) add a stylistic dimension by showing that populist communication combines ideological messages with negativity, emotionality and sociability. More specifically, populist communication is characterized by negativity toward elites, out-groups, or social conditions; crisis rhetoric and exaggerations; emotionalization; absolutist, black-and-white framing; patriotic references to an idealized nation; complexity reduction through simple and colloquial language; and intimization through personal self-disclosure (Ernst et al., 2019, pp. 10–11). Across these approaches, populism appears not exclusively as defined by ideology, but also by a recurrent communicative pattern.

This is especially visible in social media environments, where direct communication, reduced gatekeeping, and platform-specific visibility logics are particularly conducive to populist communication. Comparative research shows that politicians use populist communication strategies more frequently on social media than on political talk shows (Ernst et al., 2019, pp. 9–11) and that people-centrism, anti-elitism, and sovereignty are core dimensions of candidates' communication on social networking sites during election periods (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020, pp. 1532–1533, 1542–1545). Similarly to Wirth et al. (2016, pp. 48–51), Gründl (2022, p. 1486) interprets populist communication as both advocative toward the people and conflictive toward the elite, with sovereignty claims spanning both dimensions. Across these studies, populism emerges as a patterned mode of communication whose structure can be operationalized and compared.

Within this framework, the use of dictionary-based measurement techniques presents a conceptually credible approach. Gründl (2022, pp. 1484–1485) argues that ideational definitions enable the conceptualization of populism as an inherent feature of the individual political message, rather than of the communicator. Wirth et al. (2016, p. 35) similarly argue that all politicians have populist tendencies to some degree. The critical issue lies in determining the extent to which this tendency manifests.

Based on this idea, Gründl (2022, pp. 1486–1489) developed a German-language dictionary for identifying populist communication through quantitative digital text analysis. His approach is based on the assumption that recurring lexical markers can capture the core elements of ideational populism in social media texts, provided that people-centrism, anti-elitism, and sovereignty are represented in the measurement model (Gründl, 2022, pp. 1481–1483, 1486–1487). A dictionary approach does not claim to exhaust the full ideological complexity of populism. Rather, it identifies patterned indicators of communication that make the relative presence of populist elements measurable across a large corpus. Thus, populism can be regarded as a quantifiable form of communication rooted in a stable ideational core and manifested through recurrent lexical, rhetorical, and antagonistic features.

2.2.2 *Constructing “the elite” and antagonism*

Anti-elitism constitutes a core element of populist communication, as it organizes political conflict through a moralized opposition between “the people” and those who allegedly obstruct their will. In Mudde’s (2004, pp. 544–546) ideational definition, the antagonism between “the pure people” and “the corrupt elite” represents the central polarity of populism. Wirth et al. (2016, pp. 50–51) translate this into measurable communicative patterns, by describing the elite as “the evil counterpart to the people” and identifying blame shifting, discrediting the elite, and marking distance from the elite as core anti-elitist strategies. This frames the elite as separate from the will and power of the people and establishes the populist actor as part of the people rather than the elite (Wirth et al., 2016, pp. 50–51). Hameleers et al. (2017, pp. 871–872) complement this by conceptualizing populist communication as “emotionalized blame attribution” directed at elites, defining it as a communicative form that assigns responsibility for societal problems to morally discredited power holders.

Concurrently, “the elite” is not a semantically fixed category. Karavasilis (2025, pp. 5–8) shows that the term functions as a variable discursive construction whose concrete referent depends on context, ideological setting, and political purpose. Elites can be constructed in various, interconnected ways, including political, economic, cultural, bureaucratic, and media dimensions (Karavasilis, 2025, pp. 9–12). Järvinen’s (2022, p. 238) operationalization reaches a similar conclusion by including antipolitical, antistate, antimedia, anti-intellectual, and antieconomic tendencies within anti-elitism. Elite-related indicators should therefore be interpreted less as references to a stable enemy than as indicators of antagonistic positioning through which diverse institutions and actors are assembled into a common oppositional category.

This flexibility helps explain why anti-elitism appears so persistently across empirical studies. Ernst et al. (2019, pp. 10–11) demonstrate that challenger and more extremist parties frequently combine anti-elite messages with elements like negativity, crisis rhetoric, and emotionality on social media. Similarly, Schmidt's (2020, pp. 2364–2365) findings from a media perspective indicate that elite criticism amplifies the newsworthiness of messages by introducing conflict and negativity, while Jost and Dogurel (2023, p. 7) find anti-elitism in one fifth of the “Querdenken” movement's Telegram messages. Across these approaches, anti-elitism emerges as a central and recurring populist pattern, both for conceptual and communicative reasons. It condenses the ideological core of populism and provides a clear vertical structure for political conflict (Meyer et al., 2025, pp. 8–9).

For the present thesis, elite references are interpreted as signs of a broader antagonistic logic rather than as references to a clearly defined group. Their analytical value lies in their construction of vertical opposition, their attribution of blame, and their positioning of political actors against allegedly self-serving centers of power. This vertical antagonism also forms one of the clearest points of overlap with conspiracy discourse, where elite critique is often radicalized into claims of hidden coordination, intentional deception, and concealed control.

2.2.3 Conspiracy discourse: definitions, functions, and wording

Conspiracy narratives are best understood as patterned forms of meaning-making that attribute hidden agency, organize threat, and provide morally charged explanations for complex or unsettling events (e.g., Baden & Sharon, 2021, p. 85; Kleinen-von Königslöw et al., 2025, p. 38; Mahl et al., 2023, p. 1782; Schulze et al., 2022, p. 1106; Schwaiger et al., 2022, pp. 1009–1011; van Prooijen, 2018, pp. 82–83). Research repeatedly notes, however, that the field still struggles with conceptual clarity (Baden & Sharon, 2021, p. 83; Heft et al., 2024, p. 325; Heinrich et al., 2024, p. 1932; Mahl et al., 2023, pp. 1783–1784). Terms such as conspiracy theory, misinformation, disinformation, fake news, and rumor are frequently used interchangeably, even though they refer to different phenomena and only partially overlap (Mahl et al., 2023, pp. 1789, 1797; Pustet et al., 2024, p. 2; Schwaiger et al., 2022, p. 1009).

A useful definition is provided by Mahl et al. (2023, p. 1797), who describe conspiracy theories as “unique epistemological accounts that refute official accounts and instead propose alternative explanations of events or practices by referring to individuals or groups acting in secret”. Baden and Sharon (2021, p. 83) sharpen this by distinguishing legitimate “theories about conspiracy” from “conspiracy theories proper”. In their account, conspiracy discourse is marked by unrealistic assumptions about the potency of causation (“pervasive potency”), a Manichean binary between pure good and evil, and “elusive

epistemology”, that is an elusive style of warranting and validating knowledge. This distinction avoids collapsing all references to covert action into the same category. Rather, Baden and Sharon (2021, pp. 83–86, 99–100) argue that legitimate suspicion regarding the existence of actual conspiracies remains part of democratic discourse. Conspiracy narratives become analytically distinctive when they transform suspicion into a generalized explanatory model built on secret coordination, moral dualism, and the devaluation of conventional standards of evidence, thus violating fundamental discursive norms (Baden & Sharon, 2021, p. 85). This perspective directs attention to discourse structures rather than to factual inaccuracy alone.

Conspiracy narratives also have specific social functions. Under conditions of uncertainty and low trust, they provide closure and orientation by supplying explanatory templates that connect disruptive vents to hidden actors and intentional design (Schwaiger et al., 2022, p. 1010; Shahsavari et al., 2020, pp. 280–282). This was especially evident during the COVID-19 pandemic (see Almodt, 2024; Heinrich et al., 2024; Heinz, 2023; Primig, 2024; Schwaiger et al., 2022; Stecula & Pickup, 2021; Weigand et al., 2022). Shahsavari et al. (2020, pp. 280–282) conceptualize conspiracy narratives as drawing from a shared reservoir of story structures that can be activated, recombined, and retold when groups seek to interpret disruptive events. This narrative perspective demonstrates that conspiracy discourse consists not only of false claims, but of recurrent interpretive templates that render threats, enemies, and hidden intentions legible.

Digital environments intensify these dynamics because they facilitate collective narrative construction across communities, issues, and platforms (Schwaiger et al., 2022, p. 1010; Shahsavari et al., 2020, pp. 280–281; Weigand et al., 2022, p. 52). Zeng et al. (2022, pp. 931–932) argue that digital environments amplify the visibility and association of conspiracy-related content, moving conspiracy narratives out of relatively marginal sociocultural niches into broader public and political discourse. Online conspiracy theorizing is sustained by processes of collective sense-making in which users curate, connect, and crowdsource “evidence” production across communities, topics, and platforms (Zeng et al., 2022, p. 932). This renders conspiracy narratives as being highly adaptive and cohesive. They travel easily because they invite users to connect disparate actors, institutions, and events within a shared explanatory pattern.

From a linguistic perspective, conspiracy discourse is constructed through recurring rhetorical patterns rather than a set of explicit labels. Römer’s (2022, pp. 301–302) analysis of conspiracy theories as forms of language-based social reality construction identifies

characteristic forms such as metaphors of light and darkness (Manichean binary), theatrical metaphors, idiomatic expressions of concealment, topoi of doubt, and vocabularies of exposure and unmasking. Römer and Stumpf likewise demonstrate that AfD-related conspiracy discourse is frequently constructed through presuppositions, reinterpretations, and specific lexical indicators, as opposed to overtly identifiable wording typically associated with “conspiracy” (Römer & Stumpf, 2019, pp. 130–134, 140). Buehling et al. (2025, pp. 2–5) extend this by demonstrating that conspiracy discourse exhibits variation in style and function across different digital platforms and can take more coded and veiled forms that mask racist or antisemitic content, thereby facilitating its broader dissemination (Buehling et al., 2025, pp. 17–18).

For the present thesis, two conclusions follow. Firstly, conspiracy discourse should be regarded as a distinct communicative formation rather than as a synonym for misinformation or “Fake News”. Its defining characteristics lie in hidden agency, anti-institutional interpretation, moralized conflict, and specific modes of evidential reasoning. Secondly, while dictionary-based approaches are well suited to capture repeated lexical signals and recurrent semantic fields, the broader conspiracy discourse also encompasses veiled, fragmented, and rhetorically coded forms (see also Buehling et al., 2025). This underscores the following examination of the convergence between populism and conspiracy, especially within the context of the AfD. Once conspiracy narratives are recognized as patterned and context-sensitive forms of sense-making, their intersection with anti-elitist populist communication becomes conceptually evident.

2.2.4 The convergence of populism and conspiracy discourse within the AfD

Although populism and conspiracy narratives are analytically distinct, they intersect in systematic ways. Both are characterized by distrust and a strong presence of antagonistic worldviews, as well as a pronounced distinction between an in-group perceived as being under threat and external actors who are held responsible for that threat. Van Prooijen (2018, pp. 86–91) identifies anti-elitism, anti-pluralism, and threatened nationalism as central dimensions through which populism and conspiracy thinking converge. Anti-elitism encourages suspicion toward powerful political and societal actors, the elite, which are viewed as evil, corrupt, and acting in self-interest. Further assuming those elites form conspiracies with ill intent is, according to van Prooijen (2018, p. 86), a “small step”. Anti-pluralism moralizes dissent by treating one’s own position as the only legitimate expression of the people’s will. This implies that everyone who does not align with the populist agenda is either complicit in “the establishment” or is actively conspiring with it. Lastly, threatened

nationalism frames the in-group as under attack by external enemies. Together, these dimensions establish a shared interpretive structure in which political conflict is understood as the result of betrayal, manipulation, and concealed hostility directed against a morally privileged collective. Conspiracy narratives intensify this structure by attributing intentional coordination and hidden design to those enemies that populism already marks as illegitimate.

Empirical research supports this connection. Stecula and Pickup (2021, pp. 1–2, 7–8) demonstrate that populist attitudes significantly predict belief in COVID-19-related conspiracy theories, beyond the influence of partisanship and media consumption. Their interpretation conceptualizes populism as a worldview characterized by hostility toward elites and distrust of experts, both of which facilitate receptivity to conspirational explanations (Stecula & Pickup, 2021, pp. 1–2, 7–8). Balta et al. (2022, pp. 626, 633–635) reach a similar conclusion in another context by showing that support for a populist incumbent party can weaken conventional anti-elite attitudes toward domestic politicians while strengthening conspiracy beliefs about malign external enemies, thereby relocating “the corrupt elite” to global and foreign actors. Across these studies, the central point remains that populism and conspiracy thinking are connected by a common anti-establishment logic, even when the concrete enemy image remains flexible. The concept of the elite can be redefined, displaced, and expanded without the dissolution of the underlying antagonism.

This flexibility is especially evident in the case of the AfD. The party’s communication combines anti-establishment rhetoric, anti-immigration messaging, and distrust toward mainstream institutions. Research shows that the AfD used social media very effectively to disseminate provocative and negative anti-establishment communication and achieved unusually high online visibility in comparison with other German parties (Medina Serrano et al., 2019, pp. 215–216). Schumann et al. (2021, p. 923) add that social media environments are especially favorable to populist radical right actors because they enable users to engage in information distribution and extend its reach through engagement and recirculation. In the AfD case, anti-elite communication, media distrust, and digital dissemination therefore form a mutually reinforcing constellation.

Conspiracy discourse intensifies populist antagonism by adding a stronger account of hidden causality, sharper threat scenarios, and more radical forms of blame attribution. Römer and Stumpf (2019, pp. 143–146, 151–155) document how this combination of populism and conspiracism is realized linguistically in AfD discourse. Through terms and argumentative patterns such as The Great Replacement (*Großer Austausch*) and *Lügenpresse* (Lying Press, similar to Fake News), which connect anti-elite rhetoric to narratives of concealment,

replacement, and suppressed truth, the AfD combines populist and conspiracist elements. Furthermore, these expressions are embedded in a broader strategy of shifting the boundaries of what can be publicly said. The reintroduction of historically loaded and extremist terms (*Umvolkung*) is facilitated through metacommentary, claims of taboo, and assertions that these terms offer a more accurate depiction of reality than “socially accepted” language does (Römer & Stumpf, 2019, pp. 151–155).

Leschzyk (2021, pp. 485–487) identifies a closely related pattern in the AfD’s pandemic rhetoric, where government actors were delegitimized through references to dictatorship, constitutional illegitimacy, and the destruction of democratic order. These formulations did more than criticize policy, they transformed institutional conflict into a struggle over democratic legitimacy itself. Wondreys and Mudde’s (2022, pp. 86–88) observation that far-right actors adapted their ideological core to crisis conditions is relevant here, because the pandemic offered a particularly productive setting for converging populist anti-elitism with conspiracist narratives of state overreach, concealed motives, and national endangerment. Almodt (2024, pp. 4–6, 19–20) shows the same overlap in German Querdenken Telegram discourse, where anti-elite and anti-mainstream rhetoric coexisted with conspiracist narratives about the Great Reset, QAnon, and illegitimate statehood, while AfD politicians helped politicize the crisis through such frames.

This overlap is a primary reason why the AfD constitutes a suitable case for the present thesis. Heinisch and Werner (2019, pp. 476–477, 488) demonstrate that populist radical right representation is structured through morally charged constructions of “the people”, and that within the framework of the AfD, this takes a more exclusionary form, centered on a German “*Staatsvolk*” rather than on a merely vulnerable underdog collective. Urman and Katz’s (2022, p. 914) observation that, as of June 2020, the AfD’s unofficial Telegram channel had only 21 subscribers underscores how much this field changed over time and how quickly far-right communication infrastructures developed on Telegram in subsequent years. By the 2025 Bundestag campaign, Telegram had evolved into a significantly more relevant environment for party-affiliated and adjacent communication than initial observations would have indicated, with over 60 documented AfD-related channels, some with over 10.000 followers.

For the present study, the overlap between populism and conspiracy discourse clarifies why the categories captured by RPC-Lex are theoretically substantial in context of the AfD. Anti-elitism, threatened sovereignty, media distrust, replacement narratives, and vocabularies of concealment or exposure are not independent fragments, they belong to an interconnected

communicative formation, wherein populist antagonism and conspiracist interpretation reinforce one another.

2.3 Telegram as a distinct platform environment

Having identified populism and conspiracy discourse as the central communicative patterns of interest, the subsequent step is to examine the platform environment in which these patterns are articulated and circulated. Telegram's relevance lies not solely in its use by political actors, but also in its architectural design, governance mechanisms, and communicative design, which collectively shape the way messages are disseminated, accessed, and circulated. Existing studies consistently demonstrate that Telegram's political relevance is associated with a particular combination of public broadcasting, group-based interaction, minimal moderation, and cross-channel circulation (see Bader et al., 2025; Kiess, 2025; Panahi et al., 2025; Rinsdorf et al., 2024; Simon et al., 2023; Willaert, 2023).

2.3.1 Telegram's platform architecture and platform actorness

Telegram occupies an intermediate position between messenger services, broadcasting infrastructure, and public communication environments. Unlike platforms that are predominantly constructed around public profiles or algorithmically ranked feeds, Telegram combines private one-to-one chats with public and private groups for many-to-many interaction, and channels for one-to-many broadcasting (Rogers, 2020, pp. 214–217). Public groups and channels can be found through name-based search and joined without prior invitation, while private groups and channels require invite links (Urman & Katz, 2022, p. 907). Channels are especially relevant to this thesis because they are designed for asymmetrical communication: only administrators can publish content, while subscribers mainly read, react, and forward messages. While groups, which are spaces where every member can share content, within the platform can have up to 200.000 members, channels are not subject to any limit of subscribers. Subscriber identities are not publicly displayed and messages from administrators are signed with the channels name, rather than their private profile. Consequently, it's not transparent whether the channel has multiple administrators. Each message is accompanied by a view count, which includes its forwarded copies (*Telegram FAQ*, 2026). Users subscribing to channels cannot interact with their content, other than reacting with emojis and forwarding messages, therefore Telegram channels can be characterized as “broadcasting tools” (Willaert, 2023, p. 3).

These architectural features render Telegram exceptionally well-suited for large-scale broadcasting with comparatively limited audience transparency. Telegram's growth has been closely linked to deplatforming processes and to its reputation as a comparatively permissive

space for actors who perceive themselves as constrained by mainstream platforms, thereby making it attractive for actors who seek both reach and infrastructural protection (Rogers, 2020, pp. 214–217; Schulze et al., 2022, pp. 62–63; Urman & Katz, 2022, pp. 905–906).

Rogers (2020, p. 217) argues that Telegram is attractive to deplatformed actors precisely because it combines protected communication with the possibility of building and maintaining a following in channels and large groups. He therefore describes the platform as both a “protected space” and a “publicity space” for such actors (Rogers, 2020, p. 217). Simon et al. (2023, pp. 3055–3056) similarly argue that Telegram’s low-threshold public space became attractive to users who felt censored by stricter moderation on Twitter and Facebook and that this helped create an environment in which extremist, conspiracist, and anti-establishment content could circulate more freely across interconnected communities.

Nevertheless, Telegram’s political role cannot be explained by its architecture alone. Telegram also acts politically through the way it governs and presents itself, which Wijermars and Lokot capture with the concept of platform actorness. In their framework, platforms should be analyzed as actors with agency, instead of passive infrastructures (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022, p. 125). Actorness consists of three dimensions: practices, performance, and perception (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022, p. 130). “Practices” (enacted actorness) refer to the platform’s concrete decisions and technical arrangements and how users engage with those. “Platform Performance” (framed actorness) concerns the values and civic imaginaries the platform communicates publicly and therefore shapes its users understanding of the platforms “operating logics”. “Platform Perception” (perceived actorness) concerns how users and other actors (states, politicians, media) interpret the platform and attribute agency to it (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022, pp. 130–131). Applied to Telegram, this means that the platform’s relevance – and its role as an actor – lies not only in what it technically allows, but also in how the platform’s reputation is created, performed, and perceived (Wijermars & Lokot, 2022, p. 125).

Telegram’s anti-censorship image is a crucial feature of its actorness. Multiple studies demonstrate that Telegram is perceived as an ally in the struggles against censorship and repression, while its aversion to strong content moderation has also made it attractive to extremist and anti-establishment actors (Almodt, 2024, pp. 19–20; Bodden et al., 2023, p. 282; Panahi et al., 2025, pp. 4–5; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022, pp. 140–141). Van Raemdonck and Pierson (2024, pp. 161–164) similarly emphasize that Telegram repeatedly positions itself against what it frames as restrictions on freedom of speech and that this libertarian stance on moderation has contributed to its popularity among extremist groups.

This also becomes visible when Telegram is analyzed comparatively. Gong (2025, p. 4) argues that platform-specific networking patterns depend on the interaction of technological design, governance, ownership, branding, and user cultures. In her comparison of X, Telegram, and Gettr, Telegram emerges as the central platform for the most radical and active communities in the German far-right network (Gong, 2025, p. 10).

For this thesis, the main implication is that Telegram should be regarded both as a technical infrastructure and an actor. Within the broader communication ecology of contentious political actors, it occupies an increasingly important place, because it provides protection, publicity, and collective amplification more effectively than other similar, competing platforms.

2.3.2 Telegram's affordances and communication practices

Telegram's relevance for political communication lies not only in its architecture, but in the affordances and specific communicative possibilities that this architecture enables. Van Raemdonck and Pierson define affordances as "an opportunity for action" (2024, p. 147). Applying boyd's notion of networked publics, affordances can be understood as structural conditions that shape how communication is produced, circulated, and encountered (boyd, 2010, pp. 45–46). boyd (2010, pp. 45–47), articulates four structural affordances for networked publics: persistence, replicability, scalability, and searchability. Recent studies on Telegram have built on this foundation, adding and re-organizing its affordances (see Kakavand, 2024, pp. 39–40; Van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2024, p. 150).

Kakavand (2024, pp. 39–40) draws on boyd and adds connectivity and identifiability. Persistence refers to the temporal availability of content, and the possibility that messages remain accessible to audiences beyond those originally intended, including "invisible audiences" reached through copying or re-uploading. Although Telegram messages, particularly those shared in groups, and to a lesser extent in channels, are subject to message deletion, the platform still displays comparatively high persistence, since content mostly remains available long enough to be archived, recirculated, and reused (Buehling, 2024, pp. 106–110; Kakavand, 2024, pp. 40–41).

Replicability is closely tied to persistence and describes the possibility of duplicating, altering, and recirculating content in new contexts, often through forwarding, screenshots, reposts, or memes, with little control by its original producer.

Scalability captures the potential visibility of content beyond its original audience. Van Raemdonck and Pierson (2024, pp. 158–160) identify forwarding and cross-channel circulation as key affordances of Telegram groups and channels. Kakavand (2024, p. 42)

argues that scalability is comparatively lower on Telegram than on algorithmically curated platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, X, or YouTube. Still, public channels can attract unlimited subscribers, Telegram does recommend similar channels, and content can be redistributed across group, channels, screenshots, and external platforms. Visibility on Telegram is therefore driven more by “human amplification” than by ranking systems (Van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2024, p. 158).

Searchability refers to how easily users, channels, and content can be found. Here, Telegram is comparatively restrictive. Users can search message content only within channels, groups, or chats they already access, while public channels and groups are mainly discoverable by name search or through recommendations. Additionally, some channels operate as informal directories, directing users to ideologically similar spaces and supporting network formation and discovery within the platform (Van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2024, p. 159).

Connectivity refers to the platform’s opportunities for establishing and maintaining links between users, accounts, or communities. Research has demonstrated that Telegram functions as a medium for fostering connection and cultivating communities – especially in the far-right spectrum (Almodt, 2024; Bader et al., 2025; Gong, 2025; Holzer, 2021; Rinsdorf et al., 2024; Simon et al., 2023). The platform provides different modes of interactivity. Groups that enable many-to-many communication, and channels that are primarily one-to-one broadcasting spaces, in which administrators address subscribers in a largely asymmetrical one-directional flow (Van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2024, pp. 154–157). Willaert (2023, p. 3) therefore describes public Telegram channels as “broadcasting tools”.

Lastly, identifiability describes the extent to which users and accounts are tied to authentic or recognizable profile characteristics rather than anonymity or pseudonymity. Telegram, with its emphasis on anonymity, does not prioritize this aspect. Although registration requires a phone number, users are not required to display their real names, photographs, or other distinguishing markers of identity to become members, contribute to, or found groups and channels. This marks precisely one of its most important affordances: anonymity, compared with relatively low moderation, restrictions, or censorship (Almodt, 2024, p. 20; Hoseini et al., 2023, p. 77; Kleinen-von Königslöw et al., 2025, p. 39; Simon et al., 2023, pp. 3070–3071).

A central characteristic of the interaction of Telegram’s affordances is the tension between ephemerality and recirculation. Individual posts quickly disappear from immediate view, but they remain available for reuse, relocation, and renewed visibility through

forwarding (Holzer, 2021, pp. 130, 132, 135; Van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2024, p. 150; Willaert, 2023, pp. 3–4). This combination of asymmetrical broadcasting, low-threshold amplification, and anonymity render the platform analytically relevant for contentious political communication. These findings are expanded upon by Simon et al. (2023, pp. 3070–3071), who argue that Telegram’s affordances “may align better with the agendas of (far-) right parties and groups”. These practices are embedded in a wider ecosystem of information flows, on which the following subsection builds.

2.3.3 *Telegram’s ecosystem and information flows*

Telegram’s communication system is best understood ecologically. Messages rarely remain confined to the channel or group in which they first appear. Simon et al. (2023, pp. 3054–3058) capture this through the concept of the “Telegramsphere”, which they define as an “information-sharing ecosystem of current affairs”. This ecosystem is formed by public chats and channels with large groups whose interrelations can be traced through user and content overlap and that “come together discuss socially and politically relevant ideas in a low moderated but public medium” (Simon et al., 2023, p. 3058).

Research consistently shows that this ecosystem is neither fully fragmented nor fully unified. Rather, it consists of clustered communities that remain connected through forwarding practices and shared content circulation. This pattern has been documented both in the Dutch Telegramsphere (Simon et al., 2023, pp. 3063–3064) and the German Querdenken networks (Almodt, 2024, pp. 18–19; Holzer, 2021, pp. 151–152; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023, pp. 5–6). In their analysis on the Dutch Telegramsphere, Simon et al. (2023, pp. 3071–3072) demonstrate that during the COVID-19 pandemic, the platform developed into a distinct ecosystem in which COVID-skeptical communities, conspiracy-oriented, far-right activist, and extremist views increasingly dominated over time. They conclude that the gradual development of increasingly extremist narratives, which were predominantly anti-establishment, anti-vaccine, and incorporated conspirational elements, may influence users who initially joined more moderate chats or channels to gradually adopt more radical perspectives due to the infiltration of extremist narratives into their discussions through the convergence of groups and users resulting from sharing and forwarding of content.

A similar pattern appears in the German Querdenken sphere. Almodt (2024, pp. 19–20) finds that the absence of substantial moderation in Querdenken-affiliated groups and channels contributes to the escalation of radicalization. Comparably, Zehring and Domahidi (2023, pp. 8–9) find that the various communities in this network progressively included conspiracy narratives and right-wing populism. They preferentially forwarded their own

messages, while maintaining connections to others through Telegram's forwarding infrastructure. Alternative and far-right media outlets dominated when linking external websites or news, while traditional media outlets did not play an important role in forwarded channel content or frequently linked websites (see, for instance, Almodt, 2024, p. 17; Kleinen-von Königsłow et al., 2025, p. 45). The authors interpret this as an attempt to amplify material from their own media sphere and to shield subscribers from traditional media sources (Zehring & Domahidi, 2023, p. 9). Similarly, Holzer (2021, p. 152) notes that the most frequently shared messages, pictures, and videos were often radically COVID-skeptical and anti-government.

Telegram thereby directly contributes to the construction of alternative information orders. Kleinen-von Königsłow et al. (2025, pp. 36, 40–41, 50–52) argue that weakly moderated fringe platforms, including Telegram, can function as a rallying point in which radical and conspiracist narratives are developed and tested. The authors describe this process as “trading up the chain”, with material from the periphery being lifted into more visible platforms, such as search engines and video platforms, and, ultimately, potentially to mass-mediated reporting (Kleinen-von Königsłow et al., 2025, pp. 39–40).

This observation aligns with the broader counterpublic dynamic that was previously discussed. These findings suggest that Telegram communication is best understood as a layered ecology of clustered communities, forwarding relations, curational actors, and cross-platform spillovers. This ecological perspective reveals that Telegram is a contributing factor in the establishment of alternative information orders, functioning as a crucial infrastructural space where anti-elitist, conspiracist, and far-right actors congregate, amplify one another, and sustain comparatively dense communicative networks – without depending on mainstream gatekeepers (see Gong, 2025, pp. 13–14; Panahi et al., 2025, pp. 4–5).

2.4 Strategic and professional political communication in campaigns

Following the discussion of Telegram as a platform environment, the theoretical focus transitions to the actors who strategically utilize this environment. Election campaigns condense political communication into a period of intensified competition in which parties and candidates seek visibility, define issues, mobilize supporters, and manage public impressions. In digitalized campaign contexts, these efforts unfold through a broadened set of channels for direct audience address, incorporating platform-specific styles of communication that have become customary features of political competition.

2.4.1 *Strategic communication and campaign logic*

Telegram channel communication can be understood as a form of strategic political communication because it is purposeful, goal-oriented, and positioned toward the management of public visibility. Hallahan et al. (2007, pp. 3, 5, 10) define strategic communication as the “purposeful use of communication by an organization to fulfil its mission” and emphasize its focus on audience analysis, goal setting, message strategy, channel choice, and program assessment. Applied to political parties and campaign organizations, this dynamic implies that communication is designed in relation to political objectives, including issues ownership, voter mobilization, reputation management, and electoral support (Hallahan et al., 2007, p. 6).

This strategic dimension becomes especially visible during election campaigns, in which party communication is planned with regard to visibility, mobilization, and reputation. From a public-sphere perspective, this is inseparable from the struggle over public relevance. Bentele and Nothhaft (2010, p. 105), drawing on the foundations of Neidhardt, stress that public communication unfolds in two stages. First, actors need to succeed in bringing an issue into the public arena, and only then can they attempt to convince audiences of their interpretation. Election periods therefore condense the struggle over attention, issue definition, and resonance, while digital media gradually expand the range of channels through which it can be pursued.

Research on election communication indicates that these processes are increasingly professionalized and mediated through digital platforms. López-García and Pavía (2019, p. 3) describe contemporary campaigns as increasingly continuous and media-saturated, with blurred boundaries between campaign and pre-campaign phases, while reaching its maximum intensity in electoral processes. In contrast, Enli (2017, pp. 51–60) demonstrates that while social media campaigning has become more professionalized from 2008 onwards through standardization, specialization, and the growing use of direct online channels as routine instruments of political communication, the 2016 Trump campaign marks an unexpected turn from the established norm for political communication on social media. This approach appeared to be both “amateurish” and authentic, potentially as a deliberate strategy – or as the result of a spontaneous candidate. Either way, it worked (Enli, 2017, pp. 58–59).

Social media platforms have become central to this process because they offer what Alonso-Muñoz et al. (2022, p. 73) call “communicative autonomy”. Parties can address audiences directly and retain greater control over their messages from production to transmission, reducing their dependence on journalistic mediation.

Recent research in the field of social media platform economics further suggests that such communication occurs under increasingly explicit incentive structures. Solovev et al. (2025, pp. 3–5, 13–14) demonstrate that online political communication on TikTok during the 2025 German federal election was highly strategic, with the use of divisive content generating notably more engagement. Despite the fundamental differences in architecture and visibility logic between Telegram and TikTok, the broader implication remains relevant in this context. Digital campaign communication is shaped by strategic adaptation to platform environments and by efforts to calibrate messages to the attention conditions of those environments.

Telegram channels fit this development well. Their asymmetrical structure, controlled access logic, and continuity of direct messaging strengthen a campaign style in which parties can define issues, repeat frames, and maintain a relatively close relationship to followers. In the case of the AfD, such channels are therefore best understood as part of a strategic campaign repertoire that combines direct communication with platform environments conducive to anti-elitist, mobilizing, and conspiracist discourse.

2.4.2 Hybrid media dynamics and attention strategies in populist social media communication

As demonstrated in the preceding sections, Telegram's channel architecture provides a comparatively controlled space for direct communication by parties and candidates, while remaining embedded in wider processes of amplification and public resonance. This dynamic is particularly compatible with populist communication. A broad body of research describes a close relationship between social media and populist strategies because digital platforms facilitate direct address, weaken traditional gatekeeping, and reward communication styles characterized by conflict, simplification, personalization, and affective intensity (see Enli, 2017, p. 52; Gerbaudo, 2018, p. 745; López-García & Pavía, 2019, pp. 8, 11; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020, p. 1533; Schumann et al., 2021, p. 923; Solovev et al., 2025, pp. 3–5).

Several studies support this connection. Gerbaudo (2018, pp. 745, 749–751) conceptualizes this relationship as an “elective affinity” between social media and populism, while Hopster (2021, pp. 552, 556–558) builds on this argument by identifying a set of “mutual affordances” that contribute to the prevalence of populism on social media platforms. These include the circumvention of editorial filters, the rapid spread of sensational claims, the expression of the “general will” of the people in real time, and interface logics that favor the “populist style” of communication, such as short, simple messaging combined with emotionalized and antagonistic communication within the platforms' attention economy (see similarly, Dittrich, 2017, pp. 5–6).

In a similar vein, Mazzoleni and Bracciale (2018, pp. 3, 8–9) understand “socially mediated populism” as a fragmented form of populist communication adapted to hybrid media conditions, in which direct online address and platform-specific message formats intensify the circulation of populist references across media spaces. What these approaches share is the insight that populist communication thrives in environments where visibility is scarce, conflict is salient, and claims to proximity with “the people” can be staged more directly than in traditional media.

The available empirical evidence on parties and campaigns supports this interpretation. Politicians use populist communication more frequently on social media than in talk shows (Ernst et al., 2019, pp. 9–11), and such communication is especially pronounced in pre-election periods, which underlines its strategic value in periods of intensified competition for public attention (Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020, p. 1544). These findings indicate that digital campaign environments are conducive to the proliferation of populist radical right communication. These environments can strategically employ populist communication styles, such as simplification and antagonism, while simultaneously conveying a sense of closeness.

In the AfD case, studies show that their issues profile is conducive to conflict-driven attention strategies (Arzheimer & Berning, 2019, pp. 24–25). Maurer et al. (2023, pp. 753, 757, 759–761) demonstrate that the AfD deliberately employed norm-violating provocations as a communication strategy designed to generate public attention. Their analysis indicates that attacks on minorities and other provocative statements tend to attract media coverage, prompt scandalized responses from journalists, and increase public awareness of the party. Comparative work on digital campaigning indicates that divisive content often receives disproportionate engagement (Solovev et al., 2025, pp. 13–14). In their German panel study, Schumann et al. (2021, pp. 932–933) similarly conclude that highly visible online content from populist radical right actors, including the AfD, may provide such actors with an advantage in visibility and engagement over ideologically adjacent competitors.

Telegram is part of this wider hybrid media chain and attention strategy. In these environments, the strategic value of provocation does not primarily lie in immediate persuasion. Its value lies in its ability to trigger reactions, scandalization, and secondary circulation across interconnected media arenas. Attention itself becomes a strategic resource.

Concurrently, Telegram channels preserve strong asymmetries between senders and audiences. This renders Baldwin-Philippi’s (2019, pp. 381–384) of the “technological performance of populism” helpful because it illustrates how campaigns employ digital tools

to stage proximity to “the people” while retaining control over the conditions of participation. Her notion of “controlled interactivity” describes campaign practices that solicit feedback, responsiveness, or participation while managing these interactions strategically. Hybrid media campaigning therefore involves a dual approach. Political actors seek attention by designing messages that can travel across interconnected media arenas. They also seek control by embedding these messages in environments that stabilize framing and selectively organize participation.

2.4.3 *Engagement as a selective response under Telegram’s metrics*

The previous subsection showed that campaign messages circulate in hybrid media environments in which antagonistic and provocative content can attract attention beyond the platform itself. Telegram offers a set of visible metrics that appear, at first glance, to provide straightforward evidence of audience response. Posts may accumulate reactions, and can be forwarded into other channels, groups, and chats. In Telegram’s channel environment, however, these metrics engagement can be conceptualized as a low-threshold participatory response whose meaning depends on factors such as visibility, the platform’s structure, and the conditions under which the data was collected. Views matter as a baseline of opportunity for response, while reactions and shares indicate low-threshold forms of participation that remain analytically distinct from exposure itself.

This distinction is central because channels predominantly function in a unidirectional manner toward large groups, rather than as forums of reciprocal discussion. In their analysis on campaign communication of Telegram during the 2021 Catalan elections, Alonso-Muñoz et al. (2022, pp. 76–77, 82–84) analyze message impact through views obtained by each post. In their discussion, Telegram is characterized as a bulletin-board-like campaign medium in which impact is more plausibly tied to exposure than to interaction in the stronger sense of dialogue or deliberation (Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2022, p. 83). Concurrently, Lou et al. (2021, pp. 10–14) describe Telegram news consumption as strongly shaped by efficiency, summarized presentations, notifications, and the convenience of moving quickly between chats and channels within the same app. In such an environment, a view is best interpreted as a sign of encounter rather than of deep attention, since Telegram supports rapid, routine, and low-threshold user practices. This renders view counts as a valuable yet ambiguous metric that indicate that a user opened a message. However, they do not provide inside into whether the message was carefully read, evaluated, or whether the user agrees or disagrees with it.

As a result, visibility and response remain analytically distinct. This approach logic is consistent with the broader body of research on social media. Kite et al. (2016, pp. 2, 6) argue

that the interpretation of engagement on social media posts is enhanced when likes, comments, or shares are evaluated relative to exposure, that is, as a rate per reach or delivery rather than as a raw count alone.

At the same time, engagement on Telegram should not be equated with endorsement. While views, reactions, and forwards may be indicative of forms of uptake, amplification, and low-cost participation, they do not reveal whether users agree with a message, circulate it ironically, or pass it on for strategic reasons. For this thesis, Telegram engagement should therefore be treated as a visibility-dependent and platform-specific signal of participation.

Garz et al. (2020, pp. 92, 102) identify this with their concept of “selective engagement”, showing that users interact more strongly with politically congenial content because such interaction expresses alignment and reinforces existing orientations. Experimental research on populist communication points in the same direction. Hameleers and Schmuck (2017, pp. 1436–1438) demonstrate that online populist messages, characterized by blame attribution toward elites or immigrants, do not affect all recipients in the same way. The effects rather depend on source support. People were more likely to be influenced by populist blame messages when they identified with the sender, whereas support decreased among those who opposed the source.

In a channel-based environment such as Telegram, where subscription already presupposes a certain degree of interest or proximity (see Almodt, 2024, p. 17; Jost & Dogruel, 2023, p. 9; Simon et al., 2023, pp. 3057–3058), this mechanism becomes particularly probable. Antagonistic, anti-elitist, or threat-related cues are likely to elicit disproportionate reactions when they resonate with the interpretive dispositions of a channel's audience. Therefore, the attention strategy described in the previous subchapter has a complementary audience dimension: messages that align with their respective audiences' orientations of are more likely to generate engagement.

3 Methodology and Operationalization

The preceding chapter developed the theoretical framework for analyzing AfD-related Telegram communication as a patterned form of right-wing populist and conspiracist discourse situated within a specific platform environment and campaign context. The present chapter translates this theoretical framework into an empirical research design. It first outlines the design and the construction of the corpus, then explains the data preparation and the operationalization of the central variables and finally presents the analytic strategy.

3.1 Research design overview

In this study, I employ a multifaceted methodological approach that integrates dictionary-based computational content analysis with exposure-adjusted engagement modeling. The unit of analysis is the individual Telegram post. At this level, post-level textual indicators are linked to post-level audience response, while differences in visibility, channel-level reach, and temporal variation across the campaign period are taken into account. With this research design, I intend to capture both the composition of right-wing populist conspiracy discourse as well as the extent to which these communicative patterns are associated with different levels of engagement under Telegram's broadcast-oriented conditions.

The design addresses both the descriptive and explanatory components of the research questions. Descriptively, it identifies which RPC-Lex categories appear in AfD channels and how prevalent they are (RQ; H1), and it traces week-level patterns in overall intensity and engagement per view across the campaign period (SQ; H2). Explanatory, it models whether higher intensity is associated with higher engagement per view (H3), and whether reach is positively associated with engagement and moderates the intensity-engagement association (H4).

The methodological decisions are derived directly from the theoretical framework and concern three central principles. Firstly, I treat populist and conspiracist discourse as communicative patterns that leave observable lexical indicators and can therefore be examined quantitatively across a larger corpus, even though such indicators do not provide direct access to motives, sincerity, or fully articulated worldviews. This approach is consistent with the intended use of the RPC-Lex, which Puschmann et al. (2022, pp. 1144–1146, 1153–1155) describe as a computational dictionary developed to measure German right-wing populist conspiracy discourse online, designed to capture recurring linguistic and thematic elements at the intersection of conspiracy discourse and right-wing populism. In this study, the dictionary therefore functions as a theoretically guided measurement instrument for communicative patterns. The design thus follows the logic of text-as-data research, while also acknowledging the methodological demands of computational text analysis, including explicit preprocessing decisions, transparent dictionary application, and problem-specific validation (Chan et al., 2024, pp. 4–6; Welbers et al., 2017, pp. 249–250).

Secondly, I conceptualize engagement as a response conditional on exposure. Given the substantial variation in the size and visibility of Telegram channels, raw reaction counts would otherwise conflate audience opportunity with audience responsiveness. This follows

Kite et al. (2016, p. 6), who argue that interaction counts can become analytically meaningful once they are related to visibility rather than interpreted on their own. In the present study, this is implemented by modeling reactions with $\log(\text{views})$ as an offset, so coefficients can be interpreted as changes in reactions per view.

Lastly, campaign communication is regarded as temporally structured, while data collection is shaped by time-sensitive conditions of access and availability. Heft et al. (2024, pp. 325–326, 332–333) emphasize that digital data collection is affected by changing content structures, search environments, and platform conditions, rendering temporally sensitive design decisions indispensable in computational communication research. This approach is equally applicable to Telegram-based research on contentious political communication, where discourse formation and radicalization-relevant indicators develop over time rather than appearing as static configurations (Almodt, 2024; Rinsdorf et al., 2024; Schulze et al., 2022). Accordingly, time is operationalized at the level of ISO campaign weeks, thereby enabling the analysis to capture structured short-term shifts in intensity, visibility, and engagement during the election period. This general research design is consistent with recent research on Telegram communities with attention to mobilization and diffusion dynamics in far-right or conspiracy-related communication (see also Almodt, 2024; Bader et al., 2025; Gong, 2025; Kiess, 2025; Pustet et al., 2024; Rinsdorf et al., 2024; Wischerath et al., 2024).

3.2 Data and Sampling

The empirical basis of this thesis is a self-constructed corpus of public Telegram posts from AfD-affiliated channels. The observation period extends from January 26, 2025, to March 9, 2025, corresponding to ISO weeks 5 to 10 and thus covering the four weeks preceding the German federal election and the two weeks immediately after. This six-week window captures a phase of intensified strategic communication under electorally meaningful conditions, while remaining narrow enough to examine short-term temporal variation across campaign weeks (see also J.-H. Schmidt, 2017; Schmuck & Hameleers, 2020; Wurthmann & Hagemann, 2023). The analysis focuses on public channels rather than groups, as the thesis examines outward-facing campaign communication by identifiable political actors in a broadcast-oriented environment.

The sampling process was guided by an actor-based logic. This approach is methodologically appropriate for Telegram because public channels are openly accessible, yet difficult to discover systematically unless the channel name is already known or a direct link is available. Telegram profiles do not provide a comprehensive overview of cross-channel activity, which limits purely content-based discovery strategies (Heft et al., 2024, p. 329).

The channel pool was assembled manually on Telegram. Starting with known AfD politicians and party-relevant channels, I used Telegram's search function to identify additional public channels, checked the platform's suggested or related channels, manually reviewed politicians from the previous Bundestag period, and added several especially prominent actors within the AfD. Consequently, the search methodology employed a multifaceted approach, integrating prior actor knowledge with in-platform discovery opportunities, rather than relying on a single keyword list. The final sample contains 50 channels that posted analyzable text during the observation period. Channels without textual content in the defined window, or with only visual content and no usable text, were excluded from the analytical corpus. The included channels varied considerably in size, ranging from accounts with only a few hundred followers to the largest channel which had nearly 35.000 followers. A full list of included channels is provided in the appendix (see Appendix Table A1: Full AfD Telegram Channel Overview.).

Another inclusion criterion was for channels to be public and belong either to an AfD politician or to the party environment. Not all included channels displayed Telegram's internal verification badge. I nevertheless considered channels as sufficiently authentic when there was strong evidence of affiliation, such as consistent self-presentation, original campaign or event photographs, first-person posts attributable to the politician, clear linkage to recognizable AfD communication, and sustained campaign use. The sample is best characterized as a purposive collection of official or actor-proximate public campaign channels, rather than as a probability sample of all AfD-related Telegram activity. Its purpose is systematic coverage of relevant, publicly accessible, and textually analyzable channels within the defined campaign period.

Data collection was conducted via the Telegram API in Python, employing the Telethon library (Exo, 2016/2020), a method used in prior Telegram research (see Simon et al., 2023, p. 3059). At the post level, I collected the full text of each message, the publication date and timestamp, the channel identifier, the message ID, the number of views, and the available reaction information. I also archived weekly channel metadata snapshots, especially follower counts, in order to reconstruct channel-level visibility conditions during the campaign period, thereby ensuring the reliability of the data and eliminating the reliance on a single endpoint value. Consequently, the resulting dataset integrates post-level textual and engagement data with time-aligned channel metadata.

Because Telegram data is time-sensitive and may change through deletion, editing, or shifts in platform access conditions, data collection was organized as a repeated archival

process. Telegram trace data collection is influenced by platform-specific constraints of discoverability and the broader instability of digital trace data over time. Delayed collection can therefore alter the observable corpus, although preceding research indicates that channels are less vulnerable to deletion than groups (Buehling, 2024, pp. 92–93, 107–108; Heft et al., 2024, pp. 329–330). This limitation does not invalidate the analysis, but it delineates the evidentiary scope of the study and should be considered when interpreting the results. To reduce data loss, I archived messages daily during the observation window and recorded channel metadata on a weekly basis. Preprocessing decisions and the resulting data-quality implications are discussed in the subsequent section.

3.3 Preprocessing and Data Quality

In computational text analysis, the conversion of raw post content into analyzable tokens exerts a dual influence on the validity and comparability of the data. Preprocessing is therefore regarded as an integral component of measurement design, with preprocessing choices needing to be explicitly and theoretically aligned, rather than treated as merely technical steps (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013, pp. 269–270; Welbers et al., 2017, pp. 247–250).

Accordingly, the corpus is limited to public channel posts containing substantial textual content. The raw archive loaded for this project contained 4,981 entries. Entries with empty or whitespace-only text were removed, and images were archived separately ($N = 4,702$); however, they are not analyzed in this thesis due to the necessity of a distinct theoretical and methodological framework. This process ultimately resulted in the creation of the final text dataset, comprising 3,476 posts used for scoring and modeling. Comparable Telegram studies focused on text-based content have employed similar procedures (see Weigand et al., 2022).

After filtering, the remaining posts were standardized for analysis. Timestamps were converted into consistent date formats so that each post could be assigned unambiguously to the campaign weeks used in the temporal analysis. Tokenization was designed to preserve the unique textual characteristics of Telegram, while reducing distortions in subsequent dictionary scoring processes. URLs are removed because they inflate token counts without contributing lexical information relevant to RPC-Lex measurement. Subsequently, the text was tokenized with rules set that preserve word-like tokens and Telegram-specific forms, such as hashtags and handles. Given that RPC-Lex contains multiword expressions whose meaning is contingent on phrase structure, targeted phrase compounding was applied to dictionary-listed expressions prior to lookup. This approach has been shown to reduce unnecessary sparsity while enhancing match reliability for phrase-based entries (Welbers et al., 2017, pp.

260–261). On this basis, the following subchapter specifies how the standardized corpus was converted into the central post- and channel-level measures employed in the analysis.

3.4 Measures

This section delineates how the central concepts of the thesis are transformed into analyzable variables at the level of the individual Telegram post. Because the study combines dictionary-based computational content analysis with exposure-adjusted engagement modeling, the operationalization has to capture both textual characteristics and platform-specific interaction conditions. The measures therefore encompass four dimensions: right-wing populist and conspiracist discourse in text, engagement as audience response, reach as a channel-level visibility resource, and time as structured campaign progression. The aim of this study is to operationalize observable communication patterns in a transparent and reproducible manner. The subsequent subsections elucidate the methodology employed to derive and normalize RPC-Lex category scores, the conceptualization of engagement in relation to visibility, and the integration of reach and campaign weeks into the analytical framework.

3.4.1 *RPC-Lex and Normalization*

To operationalize right-wing populist and conspiracist communication, I use RPC-Lex, a computational dictionary developed to measure the composition of right-wing populist and conspiracy discourse in German-language online texts (Puschmann et al., 2022, pp. 1144–1145). This choice follows directly from the conceptual framework of the thesis. Rather than inferring motives, beliefs, or ideological sincerity, the analysis identifies lexically observable indicators in post texts and treats them as patterned traces of communication. RPC-Lex is particularly apt for this purpose because it was developed specifically for the intersection of right-wing populist and conspiracist discourse in the contemporary German context, and captures this intersection through a differentiated category system (Puschmann et al., 2022, pp. 1145–1149). As discussed in the theory chapter, the AfD serves as a pertinent case study due to its integration of both right-wing populism and discourse patterns associated with conspiracy theories (see Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Bachl, 2018; Gong, 2025; Heinisch & Werner, 2019; Leschzyk, 2021; Medina Serrano et al., 2019; Meyer et al., 2025; Römer & Stumpf, 2019; Weisskircher, 2025).

Puschmann et al. (2022) developed RPC-Lex through a theory-driven and iterative procedure that combined manual category construction with corpus-based expansion and repeated revision. The final dictionary is comprised of 10,829 unique entries, distributed across 13 categories (see Appendix Table A2: Full List of RPC-Lex Categories). In the

original validation, dictionary-based labeling was compared to human coding of 2,500 sentences, resulting in an overall accuracy of 0.74 (Puschmann et al., 2022, pp. 1148, 1153–1159).

In this thesis, RPC-Lex is implemented in R through quanteda dictionary lookup on the preprocessed and tokenized text posts (Puschmann et al., 2022, p. 1152). Multiword expressions contained in the dictionary are compounded before lookup, thereby ensuring the reliable matching of phrase-based entries as single units. This improves match reliability without generating unrestricted n-grams across the corpus, which would unnecessarily expand the document-feature matrix and increase sparsity (Welbers et al., 2017, pp. 259–261). For each post i and category c , the lookup produces a category-specific hit count H_{ic} . On this basis, two post-level measures are derived. Firstly, category prevalence is coded as a binary indicator, equal to 1 if a post contains at least one hit in the respective category and 0 otherwise:

$$P_{ic} = \begin{cases} 1 & \text{if } H_{ic} > 0 \\ 0 & \text{otherwise} \end{cases}$$

Secondly, category intensity is calculated as a normalized score, defined as the number of category hits divided by the token count T_i of the post i since raw counts would increase mechanically with post length:

$$I_{ic} = \frac{H_{ic}}{T_i}$$

The total intensity is then computed as the sum of all normalized category scores across the 13 RPC-Lex categories:

$$I_i^{\text{total}} = \sum_{c=1}^{13} I_{ic}$$

This produces a continuous measure of the density of right-wing populist and conspiracist indicators in a post rather than a simple measure of their presence. A post may mention a category once, which affects prevalence, or repeatedly draw on several related indicators, which is captured more adequately by the intensity measure. These measures are employed both for descriptive summaries and as predictors in the engagement models.

Using normalized rather than raw dictionary counts is a decision that prioritizes the validation of the data. Dictionary-based measures are mechanically affected by document length and baseline word-frequency distributions, so raw counts may reflect verbosity rather than discursive concentration. Automated text methods are not direct models of meaning and consequently require problem-specific validation rather than mechanical application across

new corpora (Grimmer & Stewart, 2013, pp. 267–268). Similar cautions have been raised specifically for dictionary-based measures, as validity is not built in, content length must be checked explicitly, and outputs should not be treated as self-evidently interval-scaled measures without context-sensitive validation (see Chan et al., 2024, pp. 3–4; Rauh, 2018, pp. 319–321). Because Telegram posts exhibit significant variations in length, normalization is necessary to capture the density rather than the absolute volume of RPC-related lexical indicators.

Concurrently, RPC-Lex scores remain partial indicators. Puschmann et al. (2022, pp. 1152–1155) explicitly note that dictionary applications require careful inspection of the material under study and that category frequencies can be shaped by general word frequencies if they are not interpreted cautiously. Therefore, I interpret RPC-Lex scores as lexical indicators of patterned discourse elements, not as exhaustive measures of ideological meaning or as definitive classifications of entire posts. Within these limits, RPC-Lex provides a transparent and theoretically grounded instrument for mapping right-wing populist and conspiracist communication across a larger Telegram corpus in a reproducible and analytically comparable way.

3.4.2 *Engagement and Exposure Adjustment*

Building on the conceptual distinction between visibility and audience response developed in the theory chapter, this subchapter operationalizes engagement in a manner appropriate for Telegram’s metric environment and the inferential models employed in subsequent analyses. At the post level, Telegram offers two central indicators for this purpose: views and reactions. The total number of reactions for each post is aggregated into a single metric to represent the aggregate reaction count, denoted R_i . This process yields the variable `total_reactions_post`, which serves as the primary engagement outcome in the inferential analyses. Let V_i denote the number of views of posts i . For descriptive purposes, I also calculate an engagement rate, which is defined as the ratio of total reactions to views:

$$E_i = \frac{R_i}{V_i}$$

This ratio is useful for summaries and exploratory comparisons; however, it is not the primary dependent variable in the regression models. The reason is both statistical and conceptual. Statistically, reactions are classified as count data. These metrics are non-negative and strongly right-skewed data, which makes count models more appropriate than linear-model approaches for inferential analysis. Green (2021, pp. 436–439) argues that Poisson and negative binomial regression are preferable to linear regression for such outcomes, and that

the negative binomial model is particularly suitable when the variance exceeds the mean, that is, when the outcome is overdispersed. This applies to the present data, where a large share of posts receives relatively few reactions while a smaller number of posts receives very high counts. Conceptually, raw reaction totals are not directly comparable across posts because reaction opportunities vary with exposure. On Telegram, the best available proxy for that opportunity structure is the view count. Previous research on selective engagement shows that exposure and response are analytically distinct processes. Users do not only react because content is visible, rather, they respond selectively to content that resonates with their prior attitudes, identities, or affective orientations (Garz et al., 2020, pp. 92–93, 102).

Therefore, I model engagement as reactions conditional on exposure. In the inferential models, `total_reactions_posts` R_i is the dependent variable, and $\log(V_i)$ is included as an offset:

$$\log(E[R_i]) = \log(V_i) + \eta_i$$

where η_i contains the predictors and control terms.

This specification transforms the model from one of absolute reaction counts into one of expected reactions per unit of exposure. Substantively, the coefficients can thus be interpreted as changes in reactions per view, rather than changes in reactions that are independent of visibility. This follows prior social media research that conceptualizes engagement as a rate relative to exposure (Kite et al., 2016, p. 6).

Without exposure adjustment and channels that differ greatly in audience size and post visibility, larger channels or more widely viewed posts would tend to generate higher raw reaction counts, even if their audiences were not more responsive in relative terms. This offset model thereby enables comparison of posts across unequal visibility conditions.

3.4.3 *Reach and Time*

In addition to post-level discourse and engagement measures, the analysis incorporates two contextual variables that capture structural variation across the corpus: reach and time. These two variables are necessary because Telegram posts are not produced under uniform visibility conditions or at a constant campaign stage. Reach captures differences in baseline audience size and post visibility across channels, while time captures the temporal dynamics of the election period.

Reach is operationalized as a channel-level visibility resource. Let F_j denote the median follower count of channel j , and M_j denote the median number of views of its posts during the observation period. Because follower counts alone do not capture how many users

actually encountered posts during the campaign, and views alone do not capture the broader audience base from which visibility is drawn, reach is constructed from both indicators. First, both variables are transformed using $\log(1 + x)$ to reduce skewness, and then combined into a z-standardized composite reach score, denoted Reach_j .

Reach is not treated as a direct measure of influence, but rather as a structural condition of channel-level visibility. For the inferential analysis, it enters as a channel-level predictor and, where relevant, as a moderator of the relationship between discourse intensity and engagement. This follows from the expectation that the same discourse pattern may not generate identical response dynamics in low-visibility and high-visibility channels. The main model visualization therefore includes both reach score and an intensity $\times$ reach interaction as distinct predictors of reactions per view.

Time is measured in ISO campaign weeks. The observation window spans ISO weeks 5 through 10, which corresponds to the period from January 26 through March 9, 2025. Let W_i denote the ISO week of post i , such that:

$$W_i \in \{5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10\}$$

This weekly operationalization is used because the research interest lies in structured variation across the campaign period rather than day-to-day fluctuations. Weekly aggregation provides sufficient temporal resolution to detect shifts before and after the election while avoiding the excessive fragmentation of the corpus. In the descriptive analyses, week is used to summarize variation over time in posting activity, engagement, and total RPC-Lex intensity. In the inferential models, week is included as a categorical time variable to capture week-specific shifts in campaign context without assuming a linear temporal trend, making it better suited to an election context in which discourse intensity and audience response may rise, plateau, or shift discontinuously around key moments, such as the election itself.

3.5 Analytic Strategy

The analytic strategy combines descriptive mapping with inferential modeling to address both the descriptive and explanatory components of the study. Descriptively, the analysis identifies which RPC-Lex categories structure AfD-related Telegram communication, the prevalence and intensity of these categories across the corpus, and the variation of posting activity, engagement per view, and total discourse intensity over campaign weeks. Explanatorily, it estimates whether higher discourse intensity is associated with heightened audience response, conditional on exposure, and whether this association varies based on channel-level reach. The analysis was conducted in R 4.3.1, utilizing the

quanteda package for text processing and dictionary application and the glmmTMB package for count models.

The descriptive part proceeds in three steps. Firstly, I calculate category prevalence as the proportion of posts containing at least one relevant hit within an RPC-Lex category. Secondly, I summarize category intensity using normalized post-level scores to capture density rather than mere presence. This provides the foundation for identifying the discourse elements that are most prevalent in the corpus and the extent to which they are typically presented. Thirdly, I aggregate key indicators by ISO campaign week to describe temporal variation in posting volume, engagement rate, and total RPC-Lex intensity. These steps address the descriptive component of the research question and the sub-question on campaign-period dynamics.

The core inferential model estimates the association between total RPC-Lex intensity and engagement per view. The dependent variable is the total number of reactions per post, R_i . Because reactions are non-negative, right-skewed count data and show substantial overdispersion, I use a negative binomial mixed-effects model. The model includes $\log(V_i)$ as an offset, so that coefficients are interpreted as effects on expected reactions per view rather than on raw reaction counts. The primary predictors are standardized total intensity, standardized reach score, and their interaction. In addition, the model incorporates week-fixed effects and a random intercept for channel, in order to account for campaign-period heterogeneity and stable between-channel differences in baseline engagement.

The main model can be written as follows:

$$R_i \sim \text{NegBin}(\mu_i, \theta)$$

$$\log(\mu_i) = \log(V_i) + \beta_0 + \beta_1 z(I_i^{\text{total}}) + \beta_2 z(\text{Reach}_{j[i]}) + \beta_3 [z(I_i^{\text{total}}) \times z(\text{Reach}_{j[i]})] + \gamma_{w_i} + u_{j[i]}$$

where $u_{j[i]}$ is defined as the random intercept for the channel to which post i belongs, and γ_{w_i} denotes week fixed effects. This specification tests whether there is a correlation between the intensity of RPC-related discourse and the degree of audience response, contingent on exposure. Additionally, it seeks to determine whether this correlation exhibits variations across channels with differing visibility conditions.

To determine which discourse elements are most strongly associated with engagement, I estimate a second set of category-level models. These are one-category-at-a-time negative binomial mixed models with the same general structure as the main mode. The dependent variable is reactions, $\log(V_i)$ serves as an offset, and the models include week fixed effects, and a channel random intercept. Each models incorporates one standardized category-intensity measure as the focal predictor. I employ this separate-model approach because RPC-

Lex categories frequently co-occur within posts. This renders a single, all-category model challenging to interpret due to collinearity and overlapping variance. Consequently, the category models do not estimate isolated causal effects of single discourse dimensions; however, they do allow for a systematic comparison of which categories are more strongly associated with audience response under the same modeling conditions.

As a supplementary perspective, I also assign each post a dominant category, defined as the RPC-Lex category with the highest normalized score in that post. This variable is used descriptively and in an additional model specification to examine whether posts that are centered primarily on one discourse element differ from those that are centered on another. The dominant-category approach does not replace the continuous intensity models, it offers a more condensed representation of posts in which multiple categories co-occur but one is particularly dominant. The weekly dominant-category figure is therefore employed as a supplementary descriptive perspective on shifts within the corpus.

Across the inferential analyses, coefficients are reported as rate ratios and converted into percentage changes in expected reactions per view to enhance interpretability. Given that the main continuous predictors are standardized, the reported effects correspond to a one-standard-deviation increase in the respective predictor. Model adequacy is assessed through standard diagnostics for overdispersed count models and by comparing fitted patterns to the observed distribution of the outcome. The resulting estimates are interpreted as associations rather than causal effects. Despite the implementation of exposure adjustment, week controls, and channel random intercepts, the models cannot eliminate all potential confounding factors. RPC-Lex functions as a lexical indicator of discourse patterns rather than an exhaustive semantic measure. The analytic strategy is therefore designed to provide estimates that are transparent, reproducible, and substantively interpretable within those limits.

4 Results

This chapter presents the empirical findings derived from the analysis. It first outlines the overall distribution of RPC-Lex categories across the corpus, as well as the temporal variation in posting activity, engagement per view, and total discourse intensity across the campaign period. It then shifts to the inferential results, focusing on the association between total RPC-Lex intensity and engagement conditional on exposure, the role of channel-level reach, and category-specific engagement effects. The final subchapter summarizes the findings in relation to the hypotheses.

4.1 Descriptive Overview of the Corpus and Campaign-Week Trends

The final analytic corpus comprises 3,476 text posts from 50 public AfD-affiliated Telegram channels observed across ISO weeks 5 to 10. Before turning to category-specific prevalence and inferential models, this subsection provides a brief descriptive overview of the corpus and its temporal distribution throughout the campaign period. This establishes the broader empirical context within which the more specific analyses are situated.

Across the six-week observation window, posting activity, median engagement per view, and median total RPC-Lex intensity all demonstrate temporal variability, albeit with distinct differences. As demonstrated in Figure 1, posting activity observably increases from the initial campaign weeks toward the election period, reaching its highest level in week 8 and declining subsequently. Median engagement per view follows a similar temporal pattern, peaking around the week of the election, followed by a decline in engagement during the post-election phase. Total RPC-Lex intensity also fluctuates across weeks, although within a narrower range, and does not mirror the activity curve of the others as closely. The most active phase of the campaign thus coincides with the phase of strongest relative audience response, whereas the overall density of RPC-Lex indicators changes more moderately throughout the same period.

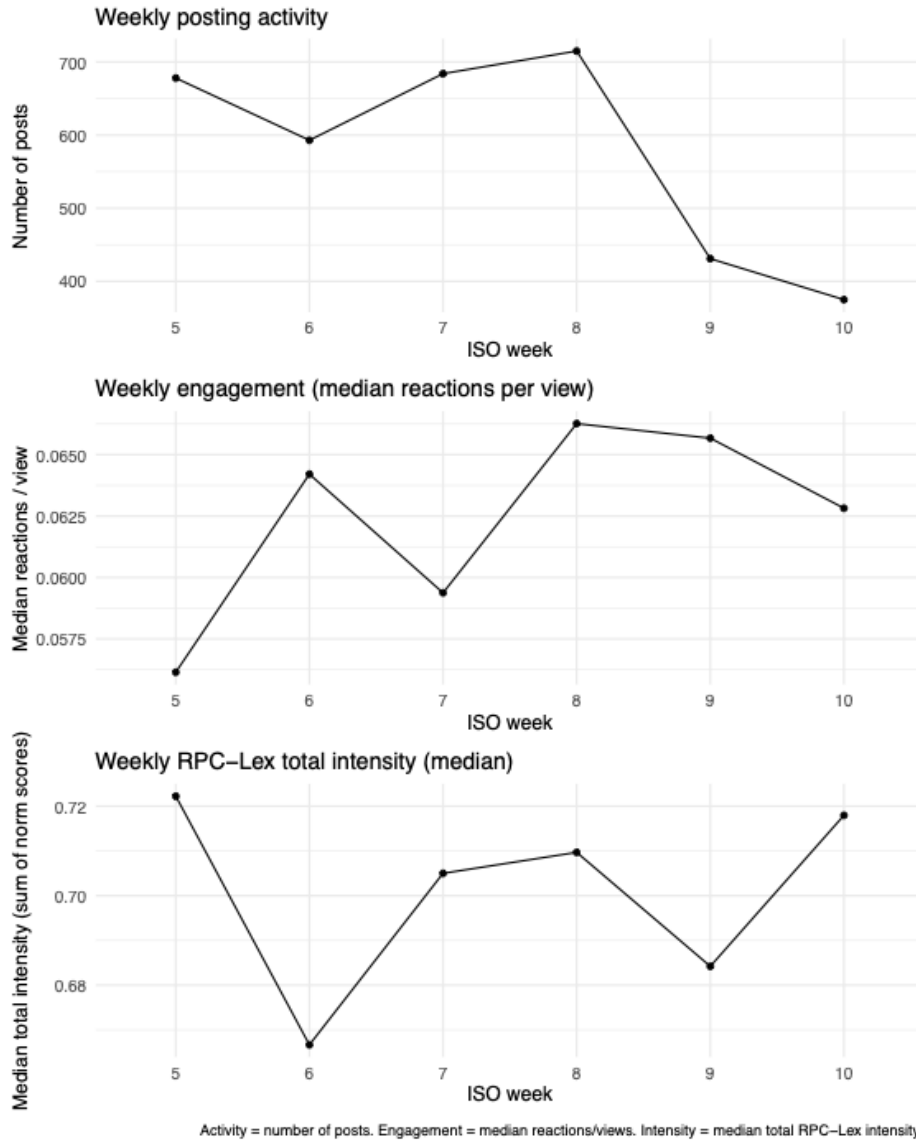
Figure 1 presents an initial descriptive map of the campaign period. It demonstrates that the corpus is unevenly distributed across campaign weeks and that engagement conditions shift over time. Furthermore, it indicates that posting volume, audience response, and lexical discourse intensity should maintain analytical distinction, since their trajectories exhibit only partial overlap. This suggests that increases in campaign activity do not necessarily imply parallel increases in discourse intensity.

For better comparison across differently scaled indicators, the appendix includes a standardized one-panel version of the same weekly trends (see Figure 5. Appendix Figure 1A: Weekly Trends (Standardized within Metric). Additional appendix materials reveal considerable channel-level heterogeneity in terms of reach, posting activity, and engagement. These contextual tables and figures support the interpretation of the subsequent analyses; however, they are not discussed in detail here, because the present subsection is limited to an overall descriptive orientation of the corpus (see Appendix Table A3: Top 10 Channels by Reach Score and following).

Having outlined the weekly distribution of activity, engagement, and overall intensity, the next subsection examines the internal discourse profile of the corpus by looking at the prevalence of individual RPC-Lex categories.

Figure 1: Weekly descriptive Trends in Activity, Engagement, and Content Intensity

Figure 1. Weekly descriptive trends in activity, engagement, and content intensity



Note. Activity is measured as the quantity of posts per ISO week. Engagement is measured as the weekly median of reactions per view. Intensity is measured as the weekly median of total RPC–Lex intensity, operationalized as the sum of normalized category scores across all 13 RPC–Lex categories.

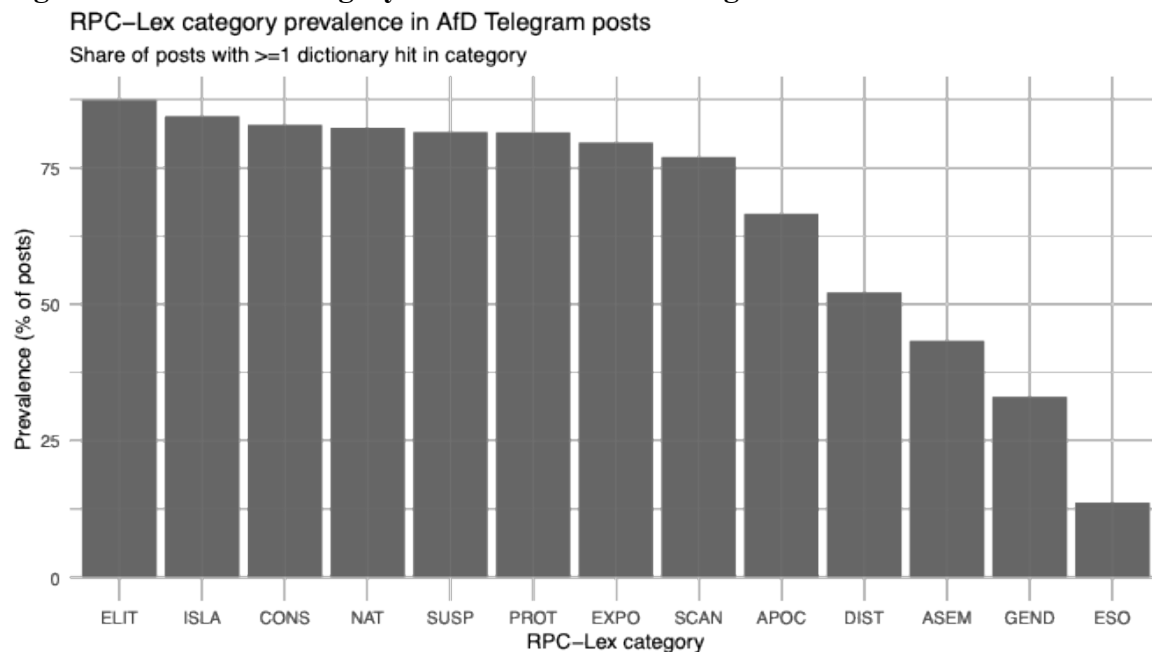
4.2 Category Prevalence and overall Discourse Profile (RQ; H1)

The first part of the research question addresses which RPC–Lex categories characterized AfD party and politicians' Telegram communication during the campaign period. This subsection provides a descriptive answer by examining category prevalence across the corpus to construct the overall discourse profile. Category prevalence is defined as the proportion of posts in which a given RPC–Lex category occurs at least once. Formally, category prevalence for category c can be written as:

$$P_c = \frac{1}{N} \sum_{i=1}^N 1(H_{ic} > 0)$$

Where N is the total number of posts and H_{ic} denotes the number of dictionary hits for category c in post i . Since categories are not mutually exclusive, prevalence values should be interpreted as the proportion of posts containing at least one relevant category, rather than as a distribution that adds up to 100 percent.

Figure 2: RPC-Lex Category Prevalence in AfD Telegram Posts



Note. The figure reports the share of posts containing at least one dictionary hit in the respective RPC-Lex category. Categories are non-exclusive, so one post may contribute to multiple categories.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the discourse profile is highly concentrated. ELIT (Anti-Elitism) is the most prevalent category, occurring in 87.4 % of posts, followed by ISLA (Anti-Immigration/Islamophobia) with 84.4 %, CONS (Conspiracy) with 82.9 %, NAT (German Nationalism) with 82.3 %, and SUSP (Suspicion/Manipulation) with 81.5 %. A secondary cluster of highly prevalent categories also occupies more than three-quarters of the corpus. PROT (Protest/Rebellion) occurs in 81.4 % of posts, EXPO (Exposure/Revelation) in 79.6 %, SCAN (Scandalization) in 76.9 %.

The further categories decline in presence more clearly. The prevalence of APOC (Apocalypse/Downfall) and DIST (Markers of Distance) is 66.5 % and 52.5 %, respectively. The remaining categories are considerably less frequent: ASEM (Anti-Semitism) can be identified in 43.4 % of posts, GEND (Anti-Gender/Anti-Feminism) in 33.1 % and ESO (Esotericism) is present in just 13.7 % of the posts. The overall corpus' discourse profile is, therefore, distinctly uneven. A modest number of categories predominates in the majority of the posts, while other categories appear more selectively. Concurrently, the comparatively high prevalence of a few categories simultaneously suggests frequent co-occurrence within

posts. The descriptive profile therefore indicates a discursive environment in which multiple right-wing populist and conspiracist elements are regularly articulated, rather than isolated expressions thereof.

Regarding H1, which expected elite critique (ELIT), scandalization (SCAN), and Islam-related content (ISLA) among the most frequent RPC-Lex, the results provide partial support. As anticipated, ELIT and ISLA are among the most prevalent categories within the corpus. SCAN is also highly prevalent, but it does not fall within the top five categories. The hypothesis is therefore supported in overall descriptive terms. However, it is only partially supported in its more specific ranking implication.

The prevalence profile answers the descriptive core of the research question at the level of category occurrence. The subsequent subchapter adds a temporal perspective by examining how activity, engagement, and total RPC-Lex intensity vary across campaign weeks.

4.3 Weekly Dynamics in Activity, Engagement, and Discourse Intensity (SQ; H2)

This subsection examines temporal variation within the campaign period; specifically, how posting activity, engagement per view, and total RPC-Lex intensity develop across ISO weeks 5 to 10. These weekly dynamics are central to the SQ, which asked how overall RPC-Lex intensity and engagement, operationalized as reactions per view, varies across campaign weeks, and directly relevant to answering H2, which anticipated an increase in overall lexical intensity across campaign weeks.

At the descriptive level, the weekly summaries are based on three aggregated indicators. For each campaign week w , the posting activity is defined as the number of posts assigned to that week. Median engagement is measured as the weekly median of reactions per view, and discourse intensity as the weekly median of total RPC-Lex intensity. In notation, the weekly indicators can be summarized as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} \text{Posts}_w &= \sum_{i=1}^N I(W_i = w) \\ \tilde{E}_w &= \text{median}(E_i \mid W_i = w) \\ \tilde{I}_w^{\text{total}} &= \text{median}(I_i^{\text{total}} \mid W_i = w) \end{aligned}$$

The exact weekly values are reported in Table 1, while Figure 1 visualizes their development across the campaign period.

Table 1: Weekly descriptive Values for Activity, Engagement, and total RPC-Lex Intensity

ISO Campaign Week	Number of Posts	Median Reactions per View	Median total RPC-Lex intensity
5	678	0.0561	0.7222
6	593	0.0642	0.6667
7	684	0.0594	0.7050
8	715	0.0663	0.7097
9	431	0.0657	0.6842
10	375	0.0628	0.7174

Note. Weekly engagement is reported as the median of reactions per view. Weekly total RPC-Lex intensity is reported as the median of the post-level total intensity score within each ISO week.

As demonstrated in Table 1 and Figure 1, posting activity is concentrated around the election period. The highest posting volume is therefore observed in week 8, whereas the lowest volume follows in the final post-election week. The weekly pattern is not fully linear, since activity initially declines from week 5 to week 6 and subsequently increases again. However, the broader pattern shows that communication intensifies toward election week and declines afterward.

The median level of engagement per view displays a similar, though not exact, trajectory (see Table 1). Consequently, relative audience response is strongest in the phase around the election itself. The contrast between weeks 8 and 9 is especially notable, as posting activity shows a steep decline following the election, while median engagement per view remains at a comparatively high level. The post-election decline in output is thus clearer than the decline in relative responsiveness.

The temporal pattern of total RPC-Lex intensity differs from both activity and engagement. The highest weekly median intensity, recorded in week 5, is 0.7222, followed by 0.7174 in week 10. In between, the level fluctuates, but stays at a comparatively high level. As total intensity is a composite lexical-density measure rather than a behavioral rate, these values should be interpreted as relative differences in the density of RPC-Lex indicators across weeks, not as percentages of matched tokens. A weekly median total intensity of 0.7222 signifies that the median post in week 5 exhibit a summed normalized RPC-Lex density of 0.72.

With regard to the SQ, the results indicate substantial variation in campaign weeks, though not to the same extent across all three indicators. Taken together, the weekly results imply three distinct yet interconnected temporal processes, showing a clearly non-monotonic

pattern. Election week is associated with both the highest posting activity and the highest median engagement per view, but not with the highest median RPC-Lex intensity. The temporal pattern is, therefore, better characterized as fluctuation around a relatively high baseline than as a linear intensification toward election day.

Considering H2, the descriptive evidence does not support the expectation of a progressive increase in overall intensity across campaign weeks. A supplementary temporal perspective is provided by Appendix Figure A2: Weekly Composition of dominant RPC-Lex Categories. The figure further suggests that the temporal shifts discussed above occurred within a comparatively stable discourse structure. ELIT remains the dominant category across every observed week. Secondary dominant categories, such as SCAN, ISLA, SUSP, and CONS, vary in relative extent across weeks. However, ELIT remains the central organizing component of the weekly discourse profile. The weekly results therefore indicate fluctuations in output volume, engagement conditions, and secondary emphases rather than a reconfiguration of the discourse core.

4.4 Main Model: Total Intensity, Reach, and the Moderation Test (H3; H4)

After examining temporal variation descriptively, the next step is to test whether posts with higher total RPC-Lex intensity also exhibit stronger audience response once exposure, channel-level reach, and week-specific campaign conditions are taken into account. This subsection thus presents the main inferential model, which addresses both components of H3, which expected higher overall intensity and higher category intensity to be associated with higher engagement per view, and H4, which expected a positive association between channel reach and engagement per view, and a stronger association between intensity and engagement in higher-reach channels.

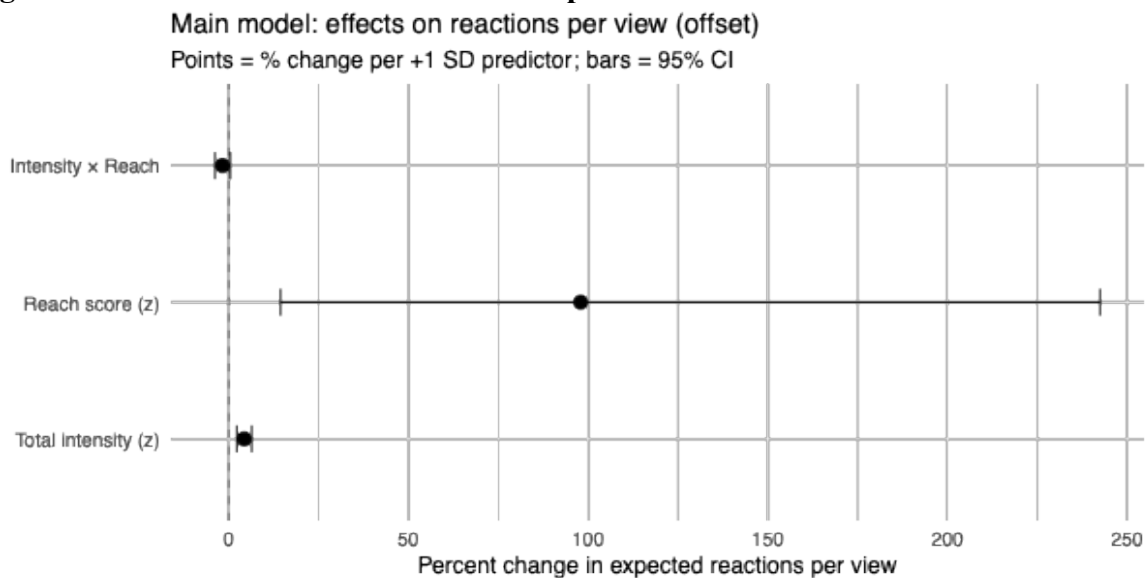
The main model is a negative binomial mixed-effects model in which the dependent variable is total reactions per post and $\log(V_i)$ is included as an offset. The model includes standardized total RPC-Lex intensity, standardized reach score, and their interaction as fixed effects, while ISO week is entered as a fixed-effect factor and channel as a random intercept. The model specification has previously been outlined in detail in the methodology chapter; the focus here lies on the estimated effects. Table 2 shows a positive and statistically robust association between total RPC-Lex intensity and engagement per view. A one-standard-deviation increase in total intensity is associated with an estimated 4.30 % increase in expected reactions per view (95 % CI [2.25,6.39], $p < .001$). Posts with denser right-wing populist and conspiracist lexical content therefore tend to receive more reactions relative to their number of views. This result supports H3 at the level of total intensity.

Table 2: Main Model: Effects on expected Reactions per View

Predictor	IRR	95 % CI (IRR)	Change in reactions per view (%)	95% CI (Δ %)	p-value
Total RPC-Lex intensity (+1 SD)	1.043	[1.022, 1.064]	4.29	[2.24, 6.38]	< .001
Reach score (+1 SD)	1.979	[1.144, 3.424]	97.90	[14.37, 242.44]	.015
Total intensity $\times$ reach	0.982	[0.961, 1.003]	-1.80	[-3.89, 0.34]	.098

Note. Estimates are based on a negative binomial mixed-effects model with total reactions per post as the dependent variable and $\log(\text{views})$ as an offset. Predictors are standardized, so coefficients refer to a one-standard-deviation increase in the respective predictor. IRR = incidence-rate ratio. Week fixed effects and a channel random intercept are included in the model but omitted from the compact presentation.

The model also indicates a positive main effect of reach. Even after post-level exposure is adjusted, posts from higher-reach channels generate stronger audience responses. Reach therefore captures a structural dimension of channel-level visibility that cannot be reduced to the number of views of individual posts. This positive reach effect aligns with the first part of H4.

Figure 3: Main Model: Effects of Reactions per View

Note. Points indicate percentage change in expected reactions per view for a one-standard-deviation increase in the predictor. Horizontal bars indicate 95 % confidence intervals. The estimates are based on the main negative binomial mixed-effects model reported in Table 2.

The moderation test yields a different result. Although the interaction between total intensity and reach is negative in sign, its confidence interval crosses zero and the coefficient does not reach conventional levels of statistical significance. Consequently, the data does not

provide clear support for the hypothesis that the engagement association of intensity is stronger in high-reach channels. Hence, the moderation component of H4 is not supported.

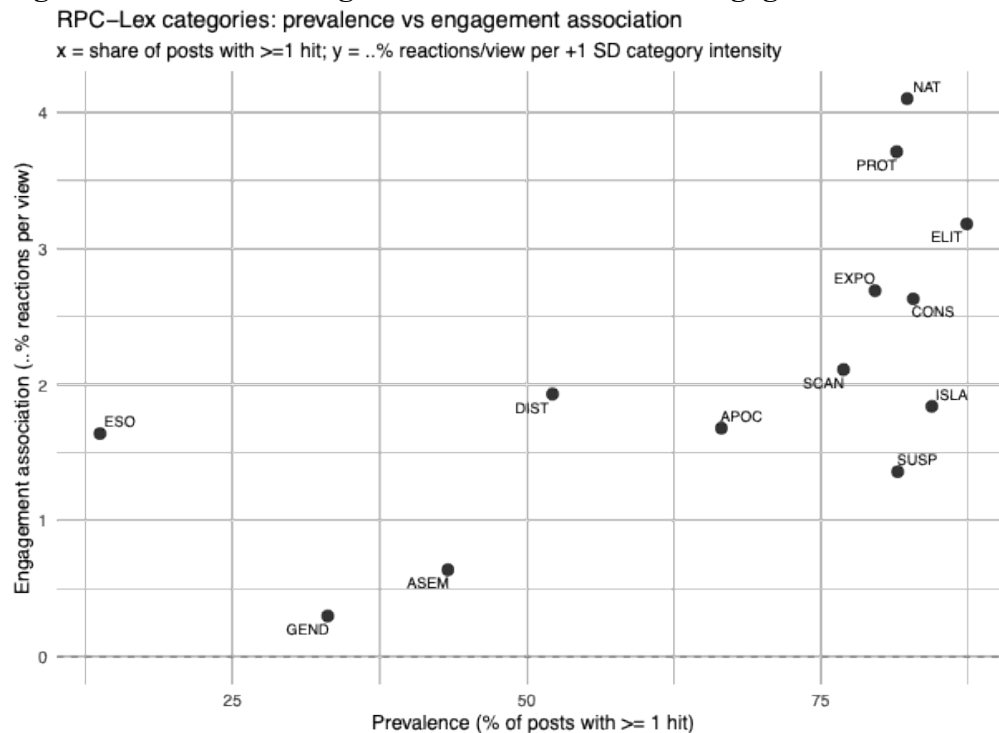
Considered as a whole, the main model suggests two conclusions. Firstly, higher RPC-Lex intensity is associated with more reactions per view. Secondly, higher-reach channels demonstrate a greater level of engagement per view. However, the model does not provide reliable evidence to assume that the positive association between intensity and engagement systematically increases with reach. Within the limits of this specification, the effect of total intensity appears comparatively stable across channels with disparate visibility profiles.

A supplementary descriptive perspective on the same interaction is provided in Appendix Figure A3: Post-Level Association between total RPC-Lex Intensity and Engagement, which plots median engagement across bins of post-level total intensity. The upward trend in the figure aligns with the positive coefficient for total intensity in the main model. However, it should be noted that the binned plot does not account for adjustments related to week, reach, or clustering by channel. The channel-specific baseline differences are documented in Appendix Figure A4: Channel random intercepts from the Main Model. These random intercepts suggest substantial between-channel heterogeneity in baseline engagement levels and support the use of a mixed-effects specification. The next subchapter moves from the aggregate measure of total intensity to the category-specific models.

4.5 Category-Level Effects and the Prevalence-Effect Mismatch

The main model examined the association between total RPC-Lex intensity and engagement per view. This subchapter examines which individual discourse dimensions are most strongly associated with audience response by assessing category-level models and comparing two descriptive orders: categories that are most prevalent in the corpus and categories whose intensity is most strongly associated with reactions per view.

As illustrated in Figure 4, the most prevalent categories in the corpus do not correspond to the categories that exhibit the strongest engagement associations. The descriptive prevalence ranking is led by ELIT (87.4 % of posts), followed by ISLA (84.4 %), CONS (82.9 %), NAT (82.3 %), and SUSP (81.5 %). In contrast, the strongest category-level engagement associations are observed for NAT, PROT, ELIT, EXPO, and CONS. Some categories are both highly prevalent and strongly associated with engagement, whereas others are highly prevalent but comparatively weaker in their association with engagement. This discrepancy in the prevalence-effect relationship is at the center of this subsection.

Figure 4: RPC-Lex Categories: Prevalence versus Engagement Association

Note. The x-axis reports category prevalence as the share of posts containing at least one hit in the respective RPC-Lex category. The y-axis reports the estimated percentage change in expected reactions per view associated with a one-standard-deviation increase in category intensity, based on separate category-level offset models.

Table 3 offers a more explicit illustration of this pattern. Among the five most prevalent categories, ELIT, CONS, and NAT also belong to the top group of engagement-associated categories whereas ISLA and SUSP do not. ISLA appears in 84.4 % of posts and has a median normalized intensity of 0.0968; however, its estimated effect on reactions per view is only 1.84 % and does not reach conventional statistical significance (95 % CI $[-0.20, 3.92]$, $p = .077$). SUSP is similarly widespread, occurring in 81.5 % of posts, yet its estimated association with engagement is even smaller at 1.36 % (95 % CI $[-0.65, 3.41]$, $p = .187$). Consequently, high prevalence in the corpus does not necessarily lead to particularly strong audience response once category intensity is modeled separately.

In contrast, PROT and EXPO do not belong to the top five categories by prevalence, but they do belong to the top five by engagement association. PROT occurs in 81.4 % of posts examined and is associated with a 3.71 % increase in expected reactions per view, (95 % CI $[1.66, 5.81]$, $p < .001$). EXPO shows a prevalence of 79.6 % in posts of the corpus and is associated with a 2.69 % increase (95 % CI $[0.68, 4.75]$, $p = .009$). These findings suggest that protest and exposure-related discourse, while somewhat less central descriptively

than other categories, are more strongly associated with audience response when articulated with greater intensity.

Table 3: Top Categories by Prevalence and by Engagement Association, with typical Intensity

Panel	Rank	RPC-Lex category	Prevalence (% of posts)	Median normalized intensity	Change in reactions per view (%)	95% CI	P-value
Top 5 engagement association	1	NAT	82.3	0.0729	4.10	[2.00, 6.25]	< .001
Top 5 engagement association	2	PROT	81.4	0.0677	3.71	[1.66, 5.81]	< .001
Top 5 engagement association	3	ELIT	87.4	0.1250	3.18	[1.10, 5.31]	.003
Top 5 engagement association	4	EXPO	79.6	0.0620	2.69	[0.68, 4.75]	.009
Top 5 engagement association	5	CONS	82.9	0.0833	2.63	[0.60, 4.69]	.011
Top 5 prevalence	1	ELIT	87.4	0.1250	3.18	[1.10, 5.31]	.003
Top 5 prevalence	2	ISLA	84.4	0.0968	1.84	[-0.20, 3.92]	.077
Top 5 prevalence	3	CONS	82.9	0.0833	2.63	[0.60, 4.69]	.011
Top 5 prevalence	4	NAT	82.3	0.0729	4.10	[2.00, 6.25]	< .001
Top 5 prevalence	5	SUSP	81.5	0.0667	1.36	[-0.65, 3.41]	.187

Note. “Prevalence” refers to the share of posts containing at least one hit in the respective category. “Median normalized intensity” refers to the median post-level normalized category score. Engagement associations are reported as percentage changes in expected reactions per view for a one-standard-deviation increase in category intensity.

The pattern shown in Table 3 shows that the categories most strongly associated with audience response are not congruent with those that are most prevalent across the corpus. In this regard, NAT and PROT stand out most. Both categories are prevalent; however, their engagement associations are stronger than those of some even more prevalent categories. ELIT combines the highest prevalence with a substantial positive effect, thus occupying a central position in both descriptive and inferential analyses. CONS is also present in both rankings, albeit with a more moderate estimated effect.

The complete set of category-level estimates is documented in Appendix Table A8: Category-specific Engagement Effects, and a quadrant-based summary of prevalence and engagement association is reported in Appendix Table A9: Categories grouped by Prevalence and Engagement Effect (Quadrant Typology). The appendix materials provide supplementary information that further clarifies the structure outlined in Figure 4.

4.6 Hypotheses Summary

The collective analysis of these results provides answers to both the main research question (RQ) and its subsidiary sub-question (SQ). Descriptively, AfD-affiliated Telegram communication during the observation period is structured most strongly by anti-elite, anti-Islam and anti-immigration, conspiracist, nationalist, and suspicion-related lexical patterns. Meanwhile, campaign-week dynamics are most visible in posting activity and engagement, and less pronounced in total RPC-Lex intensity.

The empirical results provide partial support for the proposed hypotheses. The descriptive pattern is largely in line with H1. As expected, ELIT and ISLA are among the most prevalent RPC-Lex categories in the corpus, while SCAN is also highly prevalent, though not among the top-ranked categories to the same extent. H2 is not supported. Total RPC-Lex intensity neither increases progressively across the campaign period, nor does it peak during election week. The temporal pattern is better described as fluctuating around a comparatively high baseline.

H3 is supported. Higher total RPC-Lex intensity is associated with higher engagement per view. Likewise, the category-level models show positive engagement associations for several individual discourse dimensions. The strongest category-level effects are observed for NAT, PROT, ELIT, EXPO, and CONS. H4 receives only partial support. Higher channel reach is positively associated with engagement per view; however, the interaction between total intensity and reach does not provide reliable evidence that the intensity-engagement association is stronger in higher-reach channels.

Overall, the results demonstrate that, during the observation period, AfD-affiliated Telegram communication is characterized by a concentrated array of right-wing populist and conspiracist discourse elements. Engagement per view demonstrates a strong correlation with more pronounced expressions of specific categories rather than prevalence alone. Thus, the empirical evidence indicates a stable discourse core, clear variation in activity and engagement across campaign weeks, and a positive overall association between RPC-Lex intensity and audience response. The following chapter explores the implications of these findings within the context of the theoretical framework, the platform-specific characteristics of Telegram, and the broader literature on far-right populist and conspiracist communication.

5 Discussion

This chapter interprets the findings in light of the theoretical framework developed earlier in the thesis. Its objective is to interpret the empirical results and extract implications that advance understanding the AfD party and politicians' Telegram communication,

specifically as a manifestation of platform-specific campaign communication situated at the intersection of right-wing populist and conspiracist discourse. In doing so, the discussion reverts to the central perspectives of the thesis, which include public and counterpublic communication under digital conditions, the role of Telegram as a distinct platform environment, strategic political communication in campaigns, and engagement as a selective response shaped by platform-specific visibility structures.

5.1 Telegram as a Platform-Specific Campaign Public

During the 2025 Bundestag campaign, Telegram has emerged as a platform-specific campaign environment with its own communicative logic. Telegram's distinguishing features, which set it apart from mainstream (social) media, include a combination of messenger communication, public broadcasting, and networked recirculation, the combination of which enables direct communication with the public and repeated circulation of campaign messages while reducing dependence on journalistic mediation (Alonso-Muñoz et al., 2022, pp. 72–74).

The findings provide substantial evidence to support the interpretation of Telegram as both the technical location of AfD-affiliated campaign communication and as a platform actor that plays a pivotal role in shaping the form of this communication. The corpus is characterized by a relatively stable antagonistic discourse core with a high concentration around a small set of recurring elements. The five most prevalent RPC-Lex categories occur in over 80 % of the corpus, indicating a highly consolidated communicative repertoire, rather than a broad dispersion of campaign themes. This is a salient aspect in the interpretation of Telegram's affordances. Public Telegram channels are inherently one-to-many formats, and the results provide empirical evidence that AfD-affiliated actors used this format less to diversify communication across issue publics than to sustain a stable antagonistic core centered on elite critique, threat construction, and conspiracist suspicion.

Thus, Telegram appears to be a particularly conducive environment for the stabilization and repetition of ideologically concentrated campaign discourse. Rogers's (2020, p. 217) conceptualization of Telegram as both a "protected space" and a "publicity space" captures this dual function. The channels are clearly public facing, as they seek visibility, accumulate audiences, and address publics rather than closed communities. However, they sustain a discourse strongly oriented toward oppositional and anti-establishment themes that can be reiterated with comparatively little external reframing (see also Simon et al., 2023, pp. 3055–3057; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022, pp. 130–131, 140–141). In case of the AfD, Telegram's significance lies less in its use for covert communication; rather, it lies in its capacity to let highly oppositional public communication persist and circulate within a

comparatively protected platform setting (see also Bader et al., 2025; Rogers, 2020; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022).

These results also serve to reinforce the counterpublic perspective previously established in the theory chapter. The findings do not suggest that AfD-affiliated Telegram channels constitute a distinct counterpublic functioning detached from broader public communication. On the contrary, the channels maintain an explicit public presence while repeatedly constructing politics and public communication through distrust of mainstream politics, media, and established knowledge institutions. The prevalence of anti-elitism (87.4 %), conspiracy (82.9 %), and suspicion/manipulation (81.5 %) indicates that these channels recurrently frame public life through distortion, concealment, and hostile control. In doing so, they position themselves in opposition to perceived elites, thereby sustaining alternative repertoires of credibility and interpretation.

From this perspective, counterpublic formations become sites in which alternative hierarchies of credibility are produced. This is particularly relevant for conspiracy and anti-establishment discourse, because it often depends on the claim that the dominant order is not merely mistaken, but epistemically corrupted, and that truth is accessible only to those who “see through” the deception (Primig, 2024, pp. 490–492). The concept of counterpublics provides a means of understanding how oppositional forms of publicness are maintained within digital environments. This is consistent with Fraser’s (1990, pp. 66–69) and Warner’s (2002, pp. 86–88) conceptions of counterpublics that remain relationally tied to the wider public debate, even in opposition, and act as places for the formation of identity, belonging, alternative subjectivities, and distinctive styles of speech.

Taken together, the results indicate that Telegram operates as a platform actor that integrates electoral communication with counterpublic antagonism (see also Bader et al., 2025; Wijermars & Lokot, 2022). Its political relevance derives not solely from sustained use by AfD politicians throughout the campaign, but also from architectural and governance conditions that prove conducive to the preservation of a discourse core that is highly repetitive, antagonistic, and ideologically concentrated.

5.2 Stable Discourse Core and Weekly Dynamics

The stable discourse core present in the results further supports this interpretation. The five most prevalent categories, which occur in over 80 % of the corpus, suggest an environment in which several core elements of right-wing populist conspiracy discourse are articulated recurrently and often in combination. These findings support the theoretical argument that AfD-related Telegram communication is structured by a patterned repertoire

built around anti-elite antagonism, exclusionary threat construction, and conspiracist suspicion (see Almodt, 2024; Bachl, 2018; Leschzyk, 2021; Medina Serrano et al., 2019; Römer & Stumpf, 2019). The results align both with communication-centered approaches to populism conceptualizing it as a recurrent configuration of people-centered, anti-elite, and sovereignty-oriented claims (see Gründl, 2022; Heinisch & Werner, 2019; Wirth et al., 2016), as well as with work emphasizing the structural overlap between populist conspiracy discourse in German digital communication (see Puschmann et al., 2022, pp. 1145–1150; Römer & Stumpf, 2019, p. 140; Wirth et al., 2016, pp. 8–10, 15).

The prevalence of anti-elitism and German nationalism is especially consistent with van Prooijen's assertion that populism and conspiracy thinking converge strongly through anti-elitism and threatened nationalism, both of which translate diffuse grievances into a morally simplified conflict between "the people" and "the elite" (van Prooijen, 2018, pp. 84–87). In the present case, this overlap structures the empirical core of the corpus. The findings therefore reinforce the broader claim that right-wing populist and conspiracist communication should be examined as intersecting communicative patterns rather than as separate discursive domains (see Puschmann et al., 2022, pp. 1149–1150; Römer & Stumpf, 2019, pp. 143–146; van Prooijen, 2018, pp. 84–92).

The weekly results add an important temporal qualification. H2 anticipated an increase in overall intensity throughout campaign weeks; however, the descriptive pattern does not support a linear progression. The number of posts (715 posts) and the median reactions per view (6.63 per 100 views) both peak in election week, whereas total RPC-Lex intensity does not. Although it shows fluctuation, median total intensity remains comparatively high throughout the observation period, with its highest value in week 5, followed by week 10. This mismatch between lexical density, campaign output, and audience responsiveness underscores that campaign dynamics are more clearly observable in posting volume and audience response compared to the density of right-wing populist conspiracy communication itself.

Accordingly, the weekly results do not indicate a steady escalation or radicalization of campaign content leading up to election day. The post-election resurgence in total intensity observed in week 10 further supports this conclusion, indicating that populist and conspiracist discourse did not subside with the end of electoral competition. Instead, the results suggest a more imbalanced temporal structure, in which campaign-related moments enhance attention and response, while the underlying antagonistic repertoire remains comparatively stable. While the election week intensified output and relative responsiveness, it did not

fundamentally transform the communicative pattern through which actors of the AfD articulated conflict. It demonstrated that AfD-affiliated Telegram communication is organized around a stable right-wing populist-conspiracist discourse core.

5.3 Selective Engagement and the Prevalence-Effect Mismatch

The category-level models refine the main result by showing that the positive total intensity effect was not evenly distributed across all discourse dimensions. In the main model, one-standard-deviation increase in total RPC-Lex intensity is associated with a 4.30 % increase in expected reactions per view. The category-specific models demonstrate that this overall association is predominantly driven by nationalism (4.10 %), protest (3.71 %), anti-elitism (3.18 %), exposure/revelation (2.69 %), and conspiracy (2.63 %). By contrast, some of the most prevalent categories in the corpus exhibit much weaker engagement association. Despite comprising 84.4 % of the posts, anti-Islam and anti-immigration sentiments are associated with only a 1.84 % increase, showing no statistical significance. Suspicion/manipulation, present in 81.5 % of posts, exhibits a 1.36 % increase and is not statistically significant either.

These results underscore that exposure and response are analytically distinct processes. A post may be widely viewed without eliciting significant interaction, while another may trigger a disproportionate uptake relative to its visibility. The category coefficients are therefore more indicative of selective responsiveness than as simple measures of descriptive centrality. This interpretation aligns with research that conceptualizes engagement as analytically distinct from exposure, and shows that users exhibit a more pronounced response to content that is politically congruent or emotionally resonant as opposed to content they merely happen to encounter (see also Garz et al., 2020, pp. 92–93; Kite et al., 2016, p. 6).

Thus, reactions should not be interpreted as undifferentiated attention metrics, but rather as low-threshold expressions of resonance among audiences already predisposed toward the communicative style and antagonistic framing of the channels they follow. Consequently, the positive category effects do not imply universal persuasiveness, they indicate that some discourse elements appear more effective than others at converting exposure into an observable response. In their experimental study, Hameleers and Schmuck (2017, pp. 1425–1426, 1428–1429) present a potential explanation for this phenomenon, showing that populist blame messages do not affect all audiences equally, but are most persuasive among those who identify with or support the source of the message, whereas they may even reduce populist attitudes among opponents.

Hence, Telegram channels are not generic mass publics; they are politically aligned communication environments. Against this background, an important finding is that specific discourse dimensions are demonstrably more engagement-relevant than others. Although anti-Islam/anti-immigration and suspicion/manipulation are highly prevalent in the corpus and significant to the discourse profile, their centrality did not result in the strongest audience response. In contrast, nationalism, protest, exposure, conspiracy, and anti-elitism appear to have condensed conflict and alignment in ways that were more likely to elicit reactions.

Anti-elitism is noteworthy in this regard, as it is both the most prevalent category in the corpus (87.4 %), and one of the strongest engagement-associated categories (3.18 %). This dual position indicates that anti-elitism functions both as a routine element of the AfD's Telegram communication, and as one of its most effective bridges between its discursive framework and audience reception. This finding closely aligns with previous research on radical actors on Telegram, which identifies anti-elitism as a particularly important contributing factor to virality because it morally legitimizes protest against elites and the political system (Almodt, 2024, pp. 15–17; Gong, 2025, p. 18; Jost & Dogruel, 2023, pp. 2–4; Schulze et al., 2022, pp. 1114–1115). In the present case, anti-elitism appears to have served a comparable function. It provides a recurrent interpretive key that supplies a morally simplified account of political conflict and a flexible “us versus them” frame through which other conflicts can be interpreted (see also Ernst et al., 2019, pp. 10–11; Gründl, 2022, pp. 1484–1485; Järvinen, 2022, p. 238; Karavasilis, 2025, pp. 5–8; Wirth et al., 2016, pp. 50–51).

The category-level results demonstrate that the engagement effect of total intensity is internally differentiated, exhibiting a discernible pattern. The most robust coefficients emerge where that worldview is articulated into more pronounced moral and mobilizing cues. In this regard, the results support the interpretation that engagement with AfD-affiliated Telegram communication is selective. Specifically, reactions to viewed content are particularly likely to occur when discourse elements intensify audience alignment rather than merely reproducing the most routine features of the corpus.

5.4 Reach, Visibility, and the Limits of the Moderation Expectation

The main model reveals that reach is an important factor, independent of post-level exposure. A one-standard-deviation increase in reach is associated with a 97.9 % increase in expected reactions per view ($IRR = 1.979, p = .015$), despite the fact that post-level visibility has already been adjusted through the $\log(\text{views})$ offset. Conceptually, this distinction is important. Views approximate the opportunity to react to a specific post, whereas reach captures a broader channel level visibility resource. Channels with greater

visibility provoke more robust audience responses subsequent to encountering a post. This interpretation aligns with the exposure-adjusted logic of engagement measurement (see Kite et al., 2016).

Within the context of Telegram, the positive reach effect, thus, has to be interpreted as more than a simple audience-size effect. Visibility on Telegram is not determined by algorithmic ranking. It is predominantly influenced by factors such as subscriptions, forwarding practices, and cross-channel circulation. Van Raemdonck and Pierson (2024, pp. 158–160) accordingly argue that visibility on Telegram is largely shaped by human amplification rather than by recommender systems, with channels functioning as network points and content repositories within a broader forwarding ecology.

When evaluated in the context of this theoretical framework, the reach effect suggests that more visible channels benefit from a stronger baseline infrastructure of attention and responsiveness. This infrastructure is built not only on larger audiences, but also on more routinized attention and enhanced embeddedness within wider circulation networks. The findings of Lou et al. (2021, pp. 934–936, 940–941) demonstrate that Telegram news consumption is frequently characterized by its efficiency, intermitted nature, and low commitment required to engage with it. Consequently, a “view” is better understood as an encounter, rather than as a sign of sustained attention or endorsement. The positive main effect of reach is therefore most plausibly interpreted as evidence that channel-level visibility resources shape baseline responsiveness under Telegram’s broadcast-oriented communication logic.

However, the moderation result establishes a clear limit on this interpretation. The interaction between total RPC-Lex intensity and reach is not statistically reliable ($IRR = 0.982, p = .098$). Therefore, H4 is only partially supported. Although higher-reach channels elicited more reactions per view, this did not systematically strengthen the positive association between discursive intensity and engagement. Consequently, the moderation expectation is not supported. These results suggest that while the visibility hierarchies on Telegram matter, the engagement relevance of discursive intensity appears to remain relatively consistent across channels with different visibility opportunities.

5.5 Methodological Reflection and Contribution

The results must be interpreted bearing in mind several methodological limitations. Firstly, it must be acknowledged that the engagement metrics remain imperfect. Reactions are not equivalent to endorsement, views are only an approximation of exposure, and I did not archive the number of post shares. This is consequential because retransmission is a central

mechanism of circulation on Telegram and would have made the engagement measure more robust (see also Jost & Dogruel, 2023, pp. 1–2; Kakavand, 2024, pp. 40–41; Lou et al., 2021, pp. 934–936; Van Raemdonck & Pierson, 2024, pp. 158–160; Willaert, 2023, pp. 3–4). In addition, Telegram data is vulnerable to alterations caused by platform opacity, editing, and deletion, all of which can compromise the reproducibility and distort the observable record over time (Buehling, 2024, pp. 92–94, 107–109; Venâncio et al., 2024, pp. 1552, 1554–1555). Furthermore, the corpus itself is necessarily incomplete. Due to the limited search and recommendation functionality of Telegram, channel identification relied on manual, actor-based discovery. Consequently, relevant AfD party and politicians' channels may have been overlooked. The corpus should therefore be understood as a systematic, but not exhaustive, sample of public AfD-related campaign channels. In addition, the study is restricted to one party environment, one platform, one campaign period, and text-based posts only, which constrains broader generalizability.

A further limitation concerns the lexical measurement of discourse. RPC-Lex is a theory-driven instrument for tracing the composition and distribution of right-wing populist conspiracy discourse, but it is neither exhaustive nor context-free. Puschmann et al. (2022, pp. 1155, 1157–1160, 1163–1165) explicitly note that dictionary performance depends on corpus fit, validation, and regular updating, especially because online language changes frequently. I did not systematically extend the dictionary with campaign-specific or newly emerging terms from 2025. More importantly, conspiracist communication may also be veiled, metaphorical, ironic, or presuppositional, and may therefore exceed direct keyword capture (see also Baden & Sharon, 2021, pp. 99–100; Buehling et al., 2025, pp. 16–18; Pustet et al., 2024, pp. 2–4; Römer & Stumpf, 2019, pp. 130–134). Therefore, the lexical scores employed in this study should be regarded as transparent, yet partial, indicators, which likely underestimate more implicit forms of conspiracy discourse.

The results are also influenced by the fact that election campaigning unfolds in open political environments rather than under controlled conditions. Consequently, posting behavior and audience response were likely influenced by a combination of platform dynamics, discourse content, and external events during the observation period. A salient example is the Munich attack of February 13, 2025, which occurred ten days before the federal election and intensified public debate on migration and security during the final phase of the campaign (Menzel, 2025). Consequently, fluctuations in posting and engagement may be indicative of offline political developments that cannot be fully isolated within the present design.

Within these limits, the study nevertheless makes a clear contribution. Methodologically, it combines dictionary-based computational content analysis with exposure-adjusted engagement modeling in order to link discourse patterns to audience response in a platform-sensitive way. Empirically, it demonstrates that AfD-affiliated Telegram communication during the 2025 federal election campaign was predominantly characterized by a consistent right-wing populist conspiracy discourse repertoire. Furthermore, the study revealed a positive correlation between overall intensity and reactions per view, while highlighting the mismatch between prevalence and engagement relevance. The contribution of this thesis lies in providing a transparent and empirically grounded account of how patterned discourse, platform-specific visibility, and selective engagement intersected in AfD-related Telegram communication during the 2025 Bundestag campaign.

6 Conclusion

Two developments occurred over the course of writing this thesis that sharpened the relevance of its central questions. Firstly, following a year-long legal dispute, the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (*Bundesamt für Verfassungsschutz*) was temporarily prohibited from publicly classifying the AfD as confirmed right-wing extremist (*gesichert rechtsextremistisch*). In February 2026, the Cologne Administrative Court ruled that the party could at present only be classified a suspected extremist case (*Verdachtsfall*) (tagesschau.de, 2026). This decision was made despite the court's continued perception that substantial indications of anti-constitutional tendencies remain. Concurrently, several state branches, including Brandenburg, Thuringia, Saxony, and Saxony-Anhalt, continue to be classified as confirmed right-wing extremist cases (Kehlbach, 2025; Mediendienst Integration, 2026).

This legal situation does not resolve the substantive questions that motivated this thesis, it rather elucidates the broader political context in which AfD communication is currently being interpreted. The party has transitioned from a marginal protest actor to a central and legally contested force in German politics (see also Arzheimer & Berning, 2019; Weisskircher, 2025). Consequently, the party's public communication is an especially relevant empirical site for examining how far-right politics are articulated and disseminated under contemporary digital campaign conditions.

In this context, this thesis examined AfD-affiliated Telegram communication during the 2025 Bundestag campaign as a case of platform-specific political communication at the intersection of right-wing populist conspiracy discourse. The study addressed two primary research questions. First, which RPC-Lex categories characterized AfD-related Telegram

posts during the campaign period; second, how overall RPC-Lex intensity and engagement per view varied across campaign weeks. In order to answer these questions, I analyzed 3,476 text posts from 50 public AfD party and politicians' Telegram channels, posted between January 26 and March 9, 2025, and combined dictionary-based content analysis with exposure-adjusted engagement modeling.

The analysis provides a clear answer to the main research question (RQ). AfD-affiliated Telegram communication during the observation period is structured around a narrow and repetitive discourse repertoire. It predominantly utilizes anti-elitism (87.4 %), followed by anti-Islam and anti-immigration sentiments, conspiracy-related elements, German nationalism, suspicion and manipulation, protest, exposure, and scandalization. Consequently, the corpus is not structured around loosely connected campaign themes, but rather around a dense composition of elite critique, exclusionary constructions of threat, distrust of institutions, and a vocabulary of betrayal, revelation, and hostility. Therefore, H1 is largely supported: anti-elitism and anti-Islam discourse are clearly among the most dominant categories, while scandalization is also highly prevalent, even if not among the top categories in the final ranking. These results also align with previous research on radical and far-right Telegram networks (see also Almodt, 2024; Bader et al., 2025; Gong, 2025; Jost & Dogruel, 2023; Karavasilis, 2025; Pustet et al., 2024; Rogers, 2020; Weigand et al., 2022; Zehring & Domahidi, 2023) and substantiate the thesis' theoretical assertion that right-wing populist and conspiracist discourse are intersecting, empirically observable patterns, rather than separate phenomena (see Puschmann et al., 2022; Römer & Stumpf, 2019; van Prooijen, 2018).

The answer to the sub-question (SQ) is more nuanced. A multifaceted examination of RPC-Lex intensity and engagement per view reveals fluctuations across campaign weeks, manifesting in disparate ways. Posting activity and engagement per view both increase and peak around election week, while overall RPC-Lex intensity remains consistently high, fluctuates within a narrower range, and reaches its highest values at the beginning and end of the observation period rather than in election week. Consequently, H2 is not supported. This suggests that the phase of most intensified output and audience responsiveness does not coincide with the phase of greatest lexical intensity.

The inferential analyses further reveal a correlation between the density of right-wing populist and conspiracist communication and audience responsiveness, even after adjusting for exposure. Specifically, a one-standard-deviation in total RPC-Lex intensity is associated with a 4.29 % increase in reactions per view. Additionally, channels with greater reach exhibit higher overall engagement. However, the interaction between intensity and reach is not

statistically reliable, indicating that more intense discourse is not necessarily more rewarding in high-reach channels than in low-reach channels, whereas the correlation between intensity and engagement appears robust across the entire corpus. H3 is therefore supported, while H4 receives only partial support.

Furthermore, the category-level-models reveal only a partial overlap between the most prevalent categories and those most strongly associated with engagement. Although anti-Islam and anti-immigration, as well as suspicion and manipulation, are essential to the discourse profile, nationalism (4.10 %), protest (3.71 %), anti-elitism (3.18 %), exposure/revelation (2.69 %), and conspiracy (2.63 %) demonstrate the most substantial positive engagement associations. This prevalence-effect mismatch is central to the findings of this thesis, as it differentiates between the most prevalent statements made by AfD-affiliated actors and the discourse that was more likely to elicit audience response when articulated with greater intensity. This highlights that discursive significance and engagement relevance are not synonymous. In this case, Telegram engagement showed a selective pattern, with audience response more closely associated with discourse dimensions emphasizing blame, collective identity, and implied action.

Methodologically, the thesis integrates dictionary-based computational content analysis with exposure-adjusted engagement modeling, thereby linking a large-scale descriptive mapping of discourse patterns to a more precise account of audience response under platform-specific conditions. Although this approach does not capture the semantic richness of Telegram posts, nor identifies motives, sincerity, or persuasive effects, it does, however, highlight the recurrence of discourse elements, their temporal distribution, and the elements that are most strongly associated with audience activation.

Considered as a whole, the results indicate that during the 2025 Bundestag campaign, the AfD party and politicians' utilized Telegram as a communicative environment to maintain a highly stable right-wing populist conspiracy discourse, largely free from external gatekeeping. The discursive structure itself remained stable, both temporally and across channels, even as campaign pressure influenced volume and responsiveness. What persisted was an antagonistic worldview characterized by recurrent lexical priorities and mechanisms of blame, threat construction, and manipulation by elites.

The second development during the writing of this thesis was the publication of the MOTRA Monitor 2024/25 (Kemmesies et al., 2026). According to the authors, openness to right-wing extremist ideologies in Germany increased from 21.8 % in 2021 to 29.6 % in 2025 (Brettfeld et al., 2026, p. 114). The report further identifies TikTok and Telegram as digital

spaces with a notable concentration of right-leaning and extremist users (Kemmesies et al., 2026, p. 22). The communicative patterns identified in this thesis are therefore consistent with a broader social environment in which distrust, insecurity, exclusionary attitudes, and receptiveness to authoritarian positions have become more resonant. As Römer and Stumpf (2019, pp. 154–155) argue in their analysis of populist- and conspiracist-based language among AfD politicians, such rhetoric challenges the boundaries of acceptable speech and contributes to the normalization of right-wing rhetoric in society. The present findings support that concern. The prevalence of anti-elitism, nationalism, Islam-related threat construction, and conspiracist language in a substantial proportion of AfD campaign posts demonstrates that such rhetoric transcends the confines of episodic rhetorical escalations, and instead has become a routine component of political discourse. Its sustained repetition contributes to the incremental normalization of a broader antagonistic and conspiracist discursive climate, challenging the boundaries of the politically ordinary.

Although this thesis does not claim to explain the AfD's electoral success, nor to infer motives or persuasion from Telegram metrics, it shows that the party's and politicians' Telegram communication during the 2025 campaign exhibited a systematic structure centered in right-wing populist conspiracy discourse. Telegram functioned as an actor through which the AfD consistently articulated a narrative of elite betrayal, national threat, exclusion, and epistemic suspicion, while eliciting selectively high audience engagement. This combination underscores why Telegram warrants continued attention in research on far-right political communication: It functions not merely as a medium through which radicalized language circulates, but as an integral factor to the communicative infrastructure that normalizes communicative patterns, stabilizes their dissemination, and increases their resonance within contemporary political debate.

7 Literature

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8 Appendix

8.1 Abstract

8.1.1 *English Abstract*

This thesis examines AfD-affiliated Telegram communication during the 2025 German federal election campaign as a form of right-wing populist conspiracy discourse under platform-specific visibility conditions. The study analyzes ($N = 3,476$) text posts from 50 public AfD party and politicians' Telegram channels collected between January 26 and March 9, 2025. Methodologically, it combines dictionary-based computational content analysis using RPC-Lex (Puschmann et al., 2022) with exposure-adjusted engagement modeling. Right-wing populist and conspiracist communication is operationalized through category-specific and aggregated lexical intensity scores, while engagement is modeled as reactions conditional on views. The results show a highly concentrated discourse profile dominated by anti-elitism, anti-Islam/immigration sentiments, conspiracy-related elements, German nationalism, and vocabularies of suspicion. Higher overall RPC-Lex intensity is associated with higher engagement per view, while category-level effects are strongest for German nationalism, protest, anti-elitism, exposure, and conspiracy. The findings indicate that Telegram functions as a campaign actor in which antagonistic and conspiracist discourse is both routinely articulated and selectively rewarded by audience response.

8.1.2 *German Abstract*

Diese Arbeit untersucht der AfD zugehörige Kommunikation auf Telegram während des Bundestagswahlkampfs 2025 als eine Form des rechtspopulistischen Verschwörungsdiskurses unter plattformspezifischen Sichtbarkeitsbedingungen. Die Studie analysiert (N = 3.476) Textbeiträge aus 50 öffentlichen Telegram-Kanälen der AfD und ihrer Politiker:innen, die zwischen dem 26. Januar und dem 9. März 2025 gesammelt wurden. Methodisch kombiniert sie eine lexikonbasierte computergestützte Inhaltsanalyse unter Verwendung des RPC-Lex (Puschmann et al., 2022) mit einer expositionsangepassten Modellierung des Engagements. Rechtspopulistische und konspirative Kommunikation wird durch kategoriespezifische und aggregierte lexikalische Intensitätswerte operationalisiert, während das Engagement als Reaktionen in Abhängigkeit von Aufrufen modelliert wird. Die Ergebnisse zeigen ein hochkonzentriertes Diskursprofil, das von Anti-Elitismus, Islam-/Einwanderungsfeindlichkeit, Verschwörungsdiskurs, Deutschem Nationalismus und misstrauischer Sprache dominiert wird. Eine höhere RPC-Lex-Gesamtintensität ist mit einem höheren Engagement pro Aufruf verbunden, während die Effekte auf Kategorieebene bei Deutschem Nationalismus, Protest, Anti-Elitismus, Enthüllung und Verschwörung am stärksten sind. Die Ergebnisse deuten darauf hin, dass Telegram als Wahlkampfakteur fungiert, in dem antagonistischer und verschwörungstheoretischer Diskurs sowohl routinemäßig artikuliert als auch durch die Reaktionen des Publikums selektiv belohnt wird.

8.2 List of Aides

AI Tool	Function	Application	Note
Chat GPT-5	Coding for Python and R	Coding pre writing	The proposed code was checked and revised multiple times
Chat GPT-5	Development of thesis structure	Outline pre writing	The proposed outline was significantly revised
Chat GPT-5	Linguistic revision	Identifying repetitions in the theory chapter post finalization	Results were taken as a first indicator and were significantly revised
DeepL Write	Linguistic revision	English grammar, punctuation and sentence structure post finalization	Results were revised and rewritten, used sporadically as a guide

8.3 Appendix Tables and Figures

The Appendix Tables and Figures are sorted in order of mention within the thesis text.

Table 4. Appendix Table A1: Full AfD Telegram Channel Overview.

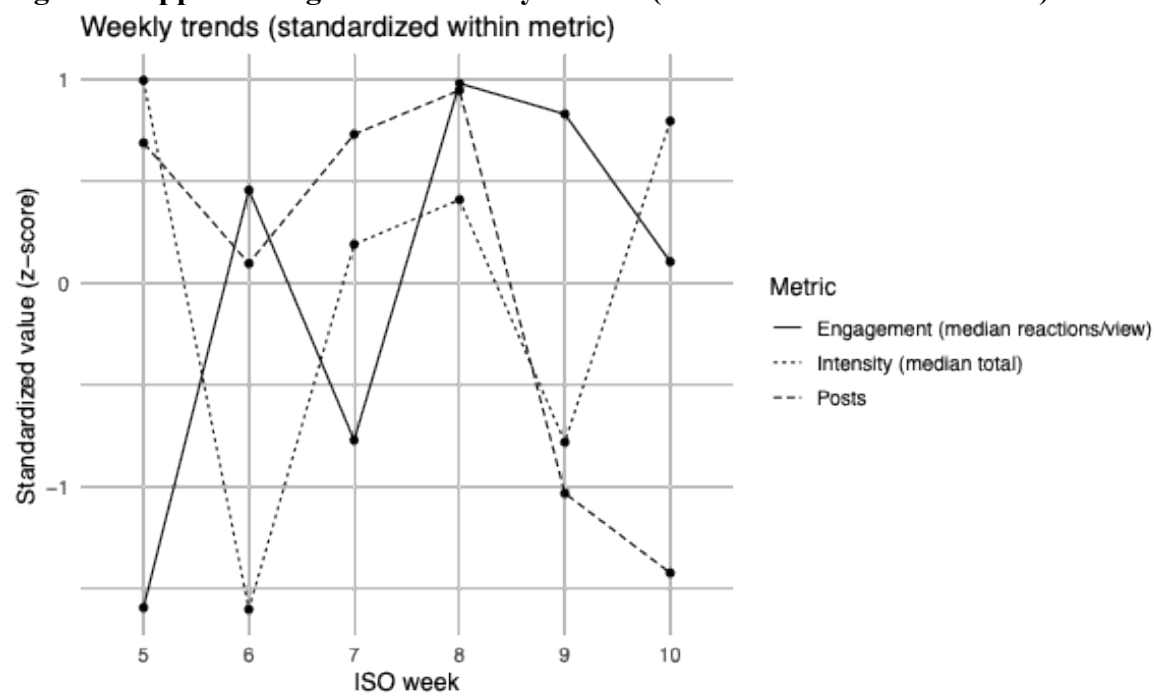
Name	Username	Posts	Median Followers	Median Views	Reach Score	Median Reactions/View
AfD Brennpunkt	@afdbrennpunkt	75	19,253	4,461.0	1.818	0.0721
Andreas Bleck, MdB	@andreasbleckmdb	41	170	114.0	-0.824	0.0625
Beatrix von Storch	@BeatrixvStorch	89	10,320	7,915.0	1.820	0.0682
Björn Höcke	@BjoernHoeckeAfD	64	47,522	20,918.5	2.604	0.0880
Carolin Bachmann, MdB	@CarolinBachmann	84	1,230	922.0	0.464	0.0552
Dirk Brandes, MdB - AfD	@brandesafd	74	1,258	510.0	0.274	0.1503
Dr. Bernd Baumann	@drberndbaumann	28	2,518	2,865.0	1.056	0.0910
Dr. Christian Wirth MdB, AfD - Klartext aus dem Deutschen Bundestag und dem Saarland	@WirthsKlartext	4	194	239.0	-0.540	0.0291
Dr. Malte Kaufmann MdB	@maltekaufmann	112	296	227.0	-0.430	0.0896
Dr. Rainer Rothfuß	@rainerrothfuss	119	3,639	1,246.0	0.891	0.0336
Enrico Komning MdB	@EnricoKomning	72	229	85.5	-0.829	0.0462
Eugen Schmidt, MdB	@EugenSchmidtMdB	19	387	232.0	-0.342	0.0395
Gerald Otten, MdB	@MdB_Otten	18	112	63.0	-1.144	0.0000
Gerrit Huy MdB	@gerrithuy	47	483	197.0	-0.329	0.0414
Götz Frömming MdB	@Gfroemming	92	372	241.5	-0.341	0.0483
Hannes Gnauck MdB	@HannesGnauck	36	544	404.0	-0.056	0.0730
Jan Wenzel Schmidt MdB	@janwenzelschmidt	47	663	241.0	-0.167	0.0505
Jürgen Braun MdB	@jbafd	9	141	155.0	-0.779	0.0000
Jürgen Pohl — Der Volksanwalt	@juergenpohlafd	42	563	233.5	-0.227	0.0893
Karsten Hilse MdB AfD	@karstenhilsepolitiker	37	2,456	1,285.0	0.783	0.0792
Kay Gottschalk, MdB	@kaygottschalk	11	181	75.0	-0.943	0.0000
Kay-Uwe Ziegler, MdB	@kayuweziegler73	360	605	164.0	-0.322	0.0629
Klartext von Dr. Christina Baum MdB	@KlartextBaum	74	3,463	1,323.5	0.896	0.0586
Klaus Stöber, MdB	@klausstoeber	1	86	39.0	-1.379	0.0000
Leif-Erik Holm, MdB	@leiferikholm	17	373	243.0	-0.338	0.0000
MANfRED SCHILLER AfD	@MANfREDSCHILLERAFD	77	123	254.0	-0.657	0.0197
Marc Bernhard MdB	@MarcBernhard	73	1,037	284.0	0.022	0.0706
Marcus Bühl AfD MdB	@marcus_buehl	66	295	190.0	-0.490	0.1208
Markus Frohnmaier MdB	@Frohnmaier	66	1,119	545.0	0.261	0.0786
Martin Hess MdB	@MartinHessMdB	54	622	363.0	-0.051	0.0727
Martin Reichardt - MdB	@MartinReichardtMdB	34	94	74.0	-1.144	0.0443
Martin Sichert Infokanal	@martinsichertinfo	101	23,387	12,167.0	2.210	0.0486
Matthias Moosdorf	@moosdorfmdb	13	120	119.0	-0.915	0.0847
MdB Steffen Janich	@SteffenJanichAfD	3	89	74.0	-1.160	0.0135
Mike Moncsek	@mikemoncsek	41	436	287.0	-0.236	0.0763
Nicole Höchst MdB	@nicolehoechstmdb	94	673	301.5	-0.088	0.0000
Norbert Kleinwächter, MdB	@kleinwaechter	75	435	255.0	-0.276	0.0497
Peter Boehringer	@pboehringer	137	17,941	6,171.0	1.904	0.0390
Peter Felser Infokanal	@peterfelserMdB	17	113	156.0	-0.843	0.0397
Prof. Dr. Harald Weyel, MdB - AfD	@weyelafd	15	53	41.0	-1.507	0.0000
René Bochmann – MdB (AfD)	@renebochmann	34	154	120.5	-0.836	0.0968
René Springer	@rene_springer	49	858	432.0	0.104	0.0636
Roger Beckamp MdB	@rogerbeckamp	12	3,587	2,445.5	1.111	0.0240
Stephan Brandner	@StephanBrandnerMdB	113	7,001	2,648.0	1.339	0.0786
Stephan Protschka, MdB	@Protschka	365	1,517	450.0	0.290	0.0696
Team Bystron	@teambystron	188	10,883	3,368.5	1.552	0.0744
Team Kraft MdB Dr. Rainer Kraft	@TeamKraftimBundestag	32	381	207.0	-0.384	0.0783
Thomas Dietz – MdB Erzgebirge	@thomasdietz	114	650	365.5	-0.035	0.0405
Tobias Matthias Peterka, MdB AfD Fraktion	@TobiasPeterka	66	216	58.0	-0.973	0.0000
Wolfgang Wiehles Wortmeldung	@wowiewo	65	253	81.0	-0.817	0.0789

Note: The Table lists all 50 public AfD Telegram channels included in the analysis. Posts refers to the number of analyzable text posts in the observation window. Reach score is a z-standardized composite based on median followers and median views. Median reactions/view reports the median post-level engagement rate for each channel.

Table 5. Appendix Table A2: Full List of RPC-Lex Categories

Category	Category meaning
Anti-elitism	corrupt elites; anti-institutional blame; against “the people”
Anti-gender / Anti-feminism	anti-feminism; anti-gender politics; traditional order
Anti-immigration / Islamophobia	migrants/Muslims as threat; exclusion; cultural decline
Antisemitism	antisemitic stereotypes; coded references; conspiracist blame
Apocalypse / Downfall	collapse; decline; existential threat; downfall
Conspiracy	secret plans; hidden actors; covert coordination; plots
Esotericism	esoteric/spiritual ideas; pseudo-medical claims; alternative truth
Exposure / Revelation	exposing hidden truth; revelation; unmasking
Markers of Distance	ironic quotation marks; “so-called”; delegitimizing distancing
Nationalism (GER)	German nation/homeland; sovereignty; identity defense
Protest / Rebellion	resistance; protest; rebellion; political action
Scandalization	outrage; dramatization; scandal/shock framing
Suspicion / Manipulation	deception; steering/control; hidden influence; manipulation

Note. RPC-Lex consists of 13 theoretically derived categories intended to capture recurring elements of German right-wing populist conspiracy discourse (Puschmann et al., 2022, pp. 1147–1148, 1153–1156).

Figure 5. Appendix Figure 1A: Weekly Trends (Standardized within Metric).

Note. The figure shows the weekly trajectories of posting activity, median reactions perview, and median total RPC-Lex intensity after z-standardization within each metric. Standardization facilitates direct visual

comparison of temporal variation across indicators that are measured on different scales. Positive values indicate weeks above the metric-specific mean, and negative values indicate weeks below it.

Table 6: Appendix Table A3: Top 10 Channels by Reach Score

Rank	Channel	Reach score	Median followers	Median views	Posts in analysis window
1	bjoernhoeckeafd	2.604	47,522	20,918.5	64
2	martinsichertinfo	2.210	23,387	12,167.0	101
3	pboehringer	1.904	17,941	6,171.0	137
4	BeatrixvStorch	1.820	10,320	7,915.0	89
5	afdbrennpunkt	1.818	19,253	4,461.0	75
6	teambystron	1.552	10,883	3,368.5	188
7	StephanBrandnerMdB	1.339	7,001	2,648.0	113
8	rogerbeckamp	1.111	3,587	2,445.5	12
9	drberndbaumann	1.056	2,518	2,865.0	28
10	KlartextBaum	0.896	3,463	1,323.5	74

Note. Reach Score is a z-standardized composite based on log1p-transformed median followers and median views. The table reports the channels with the highest structural visibility in the corpus.

Table 7: Appendix Table A4: Top 10 Channels by Posting Activity

Rank	Channel	Posts in analysis window	Reach score	Median followers	Median views
1	Protschka	365	0.290	1,517	450.0
2	kayuweziegler73	360	-0.322	605	164.0
3	teambystron	188	1.552	10,883	3,368.5
4	pboehringer	137	1.904	17,941	6,171.0
5	rainerrothfuss	119	0.891	3,639	1,246.0
6	thomasdietz	114	-0.035	650	365.5
7	StephanBrandnerMdB	113	1.339	7,001	2,648.0
8	maltekaufmann	112	-0.430	296	227.0
9	martinsichertinfo	101	2.210	23,387	12,167.0
10	nicolehoechstmdb	94	-0.088	673	301.5

Note. Posting Activity refers to the number of analyzable text posts published by a channel during the observation window.

Table 8: Appendix Table A5: Top 10 Channels by Median Reactions per View

Rank	Channel	Median reactions per view	Reactions per 1,000 views	Reach score	Posts in analysis window
1	brandesafd	0.1503	145.01	0.274	74
2	marcus_buehl	0.1208	118.55	-0.490	66
3	renebochmann	0.0968	91.30	-0.836	34
4	drberndbaumann	0.0910	91.52	1.056	28
5	maltekaufmann	0.0896	86.43	-0.430	112
6	juergenpohlafd	0.0893	78.12	-0.227	42
7	bjoernhoeckeafd	0.0880	79.24	2.604	64
8	moosdorfmdb	0.0847	91.60	-0.915	13
9	karstenhilsepolitiker	0.0792	20.67	0.783	37
10	wowiewo	0.0789	66.84	-0.817	65

Note. Median reactions per view capture typical post-level engagement for a channel. Higher values indicate stronger audience response relative to visibility in the median post.

Table 9: Appendix Table A6: Top 10 Channels by Reactions per 1,000 Views

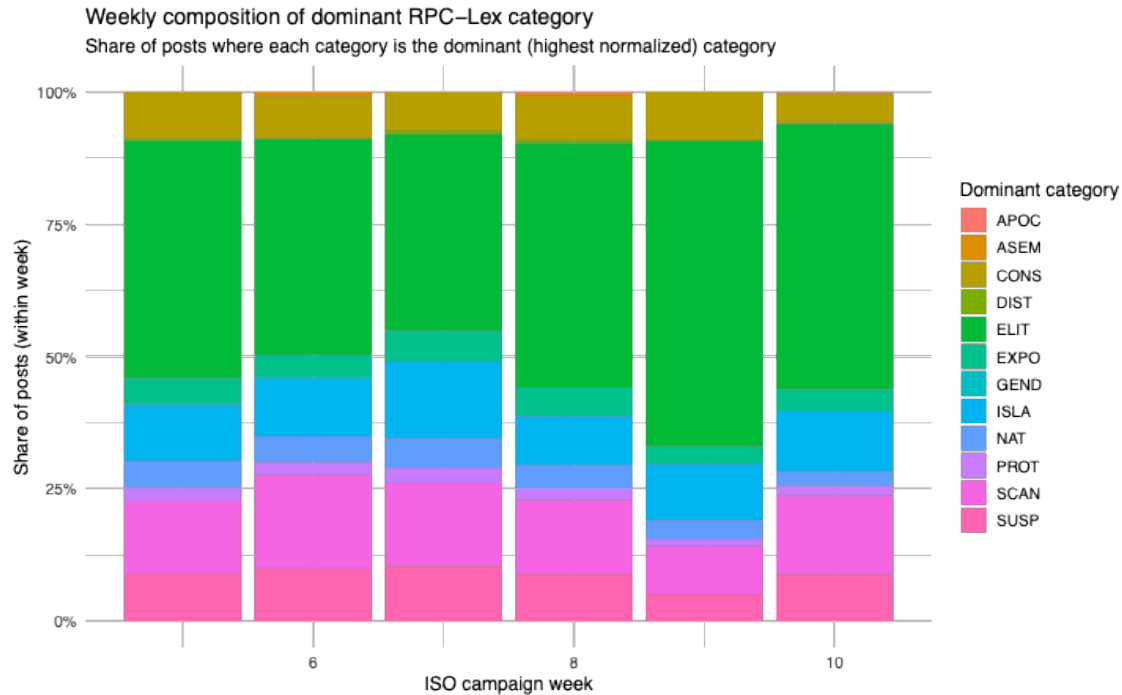
Rank	Channel	Reactions per 1,000 views	Median reactions per view	Reach score	Posts in analysis window
1	brandesafd	145.01	0.1503	0.274	74
2	marcus_buehl	118.55	0.1208	-0.490	66
3	moosdorfmdb	91.60	0.0847	-0.915	13
4	drberndbaumann	91.52	0.0910	1.056	28
5	renebochmann	91.30	0.0968	-0.836	34
6	maltekaufmann	86.43	0.0896	-0.430	112
7	Frohnmaier	80.19	0.0786	0.261	66
8	bjoernhoeckeafd	79.24	0.0880	2.604	64
9	juergenpohlafd	78.12	0.0893	-0.227	42
10	HannesGnauck	74.58	0.0730	-0.056	36

Note. Reactions per 1,000 views represent a weighted overall engagement rate across posts. This measure gives greater weight to posts with more views than the median reactions-per-view indicator.

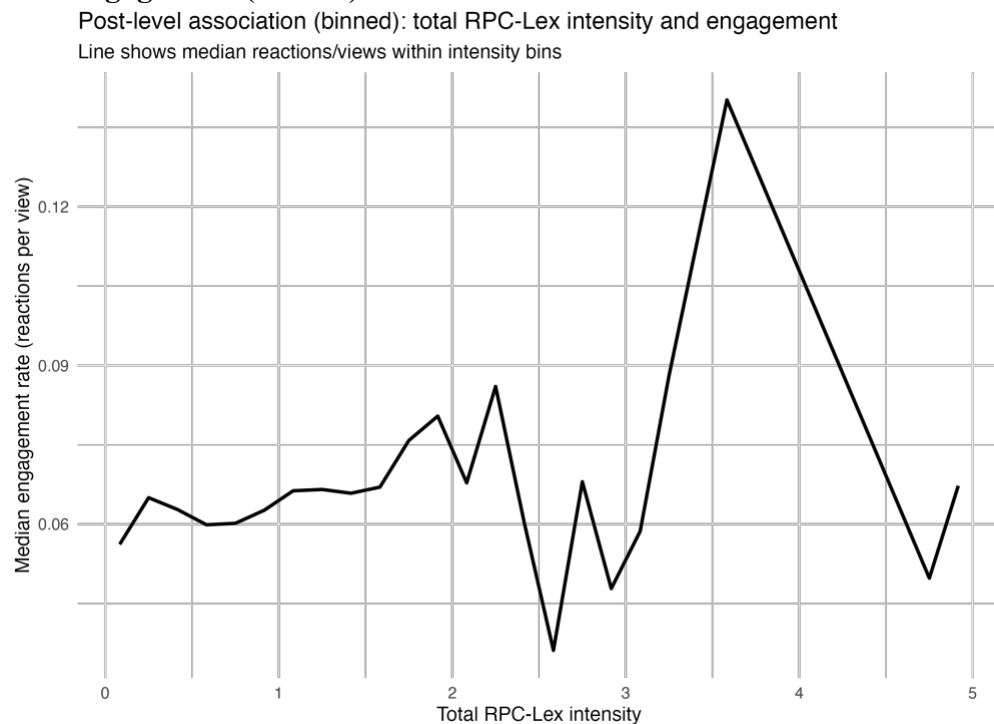
Table 10: Appendix Table A7: Channels appearing in at least two top-10 Ranking

Channel	Reach rank	Posting-activity rank	Engagement rank
bjoernhoeckeafd	1		8
drberndbaumann	9		4
maltekaufmann		8	6
martinsichertinfo	2	9	
pboehringer	3	4	
teambystron	6	3	
StephanBrandnerMdB	7	7	

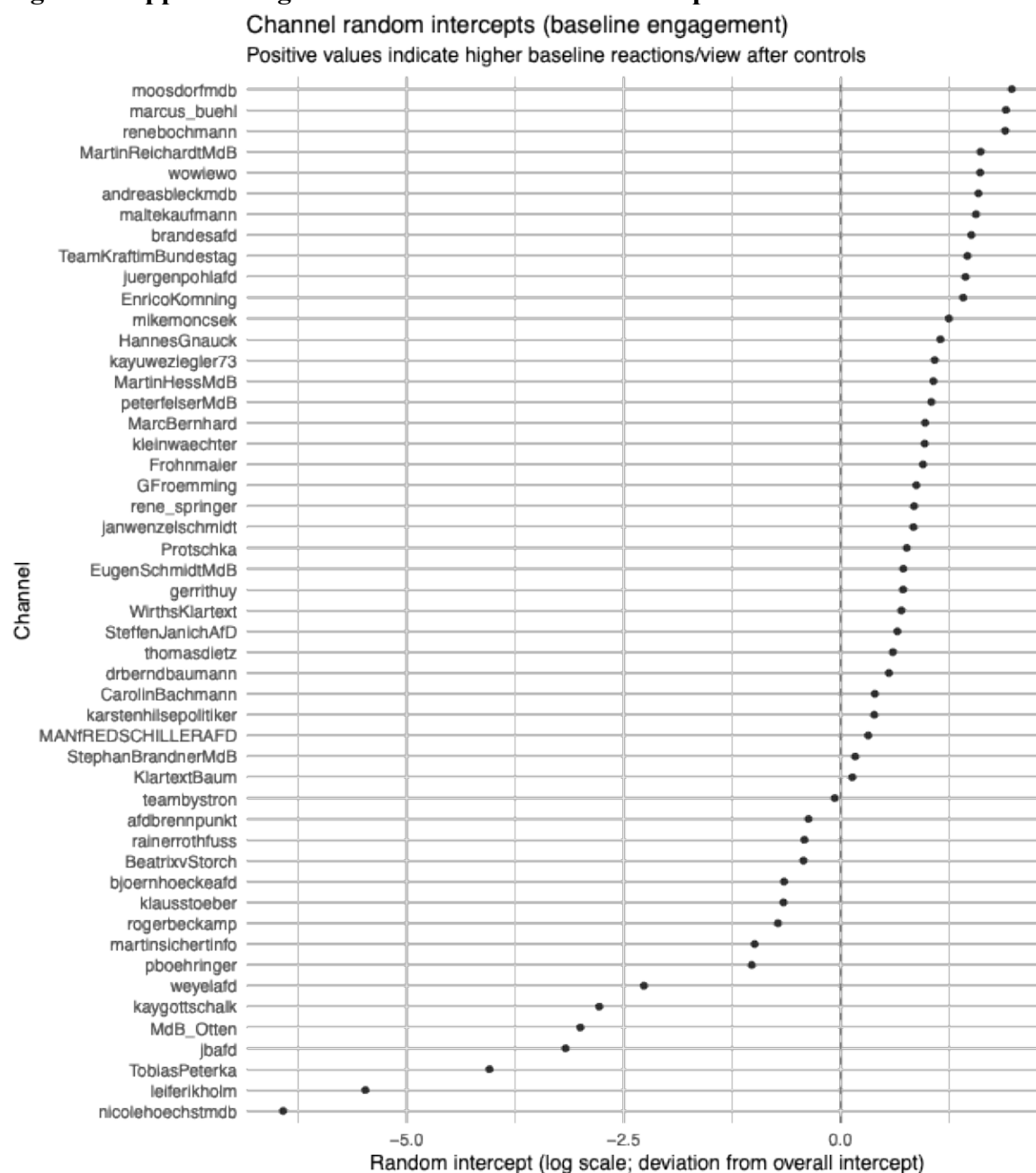
Note. The three rankings are reach score, posting activity, and reactions per 1,000 views. Blank cells indicate that a channel did not appear in the respective top-10 list.

Figure 6. Appendix Figure A2: Weekly Composition of dominant RPC-Lex Categories

Note. The figure reports the share of posts within each ISO week for which a given RPC-Lex category is the dominant category, defined as the category with the highest normalized score in that post.

Figure 7: Appendix Figure A3: Post-Level Association between total RPC-Lex Intensity and Engagement (binned)

Note. The figure plots median reactions per view across bins of post-level total RPC-Lex intensity. It is included as a descriptive supplement to the model-based results and does not adjust for week fixed effects, reach, or channel-level clustering.

Figure 8: Appendix Figure A4: Channel random intercepts from the Main Model

Note. Positive values indicate higher baseline reactions per view after controlling for total RPC-Lex intensity, reach, the intensity $\times$ reach interaction, week fixed effects, and exposure through the offset. The figure visualizes between-channel heterogeneity, captured by the random intercept specification.

Table 11: Appendix Table A8: Category-specific Engagement Effects

Category	IRR	95% CI (IRR)	Change in reactions per view (%)	95% CI ($\Delta\%$)	p-value
NAT	1.041	1.020 to 1.063	4.10	2.00 to 6.25	< .001
PROT	1.037	1.017 to 1.058	3.71	1.66 to 5.81	< .001
ELIT	1.032	1.011 to 1.053	3.18	1.10 to 5.31	0.003
EXPO	1.027	1.007 to 1.047	2.69	0.68 to 4.75	0.009
CONS	1.026	1.006 to 1.047	2.63	0.60 to 4.69	0.011
SCAN	1.021	1.001 to 1.042	2.11	0.09 to 4.18	0.041
DIST	1.019	0.998 to 1.041	1.93	-0.15 to 4.05	0.070
ISLA	1.018	0.998 to 1.039	1.84	-0.20 to 3.92	0.077
APOC	1.017	0.997 to 1.037	1.68	-0.28 to 3.69	0.093
ESO	1.016	0.995 to 1.038	1.64	-0.49 to 3.81	0.133
SUSP	1.014	0.993 to 1.034	1.36	-0.65 to 3.41	0.187
ASEM	1.006	0.983 to 1.030	0.64	-1.69 to 3.03	0.593
GEND	1.003	0.983 to 1.023	0.30	-1.67 to 2.30	0.768

Note. The table reports the full set of category-level engagement associations for all 13 RPC-Lex categories. Effects are expressed as incidence-rate ratios and as percentage changes in expected reactions per view for a one-standard-deviation in normalized category intensity.

Table 12: Appendix Table A9: Categories grouped by Prevalence and Engagement Effect (Quadrant Typology)

Quadrant	Category	Prevalence (% of posts)	Median normalized intensity	Change in reactions per view (%)	95% CI	p-value
Higher prevalence & higher effect	NAT	82.3	0.0729	4.10	2.00 to 6.25	< .001
Higher prevalence & higher effect	PROT	81.4	0.0677	3.71	1.66 to 5.81	< .001
Higher prevalence & higher effect	ELIT	87.4	0.1250	3.18	1.10 to 5.31	0.003
Higher prevalence & higher effect	CONS	82.9	0.0833	2.63	0.60 to 4.69	0.011
Lower prevalence & higher effect	EXPO	79.6	0.0620	2.69	0.68 to 4.75	0.009
Lower prevalence & higher effect	SCAN	76.9	0.0556	2.11	0.09 to 4.18	0.041
Higher prevalence & lower effect	ISLA	84.4	0.0968	1.84	-0.20 to 3.92	0.077
Higher prevalence & lower effect	SUSP	81.5	0.0667	1.36	-0.65 to 3.41	0.187
Lower prevalence & lower effect	DIST	52.2	0.0091	1.93	-0.15 to 4.05	0.070
Lower prevalence & lower effect	APOC	66.5	0.0286	1.68	-0.28 to 3.69	0.093
Lower prevalence & lower effect	ESO	13.7	0.0000	1.64	-0.49 to 3.81	0.133
Lower prevalence & lower effect	ASEM	43.3	0.0000	0.64	-1.69 to 3.03	0.593
Lower prevalence & lower effect	GEND	33.1	0.0000	0.30	-1.67 to 2.30	0.768

Note. Categories are grouped according to whether their prevalence and engagement association fall above or below the corpus median. The table is intended as a compact descriptive summary of the prevalence-effect relationship shown in Figure 4: RPC-Lex Categories: Prevalence versus Engagement Association