

Causes and consequences
of political actors' and citizens'
(social) media perceptions

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- Kelm, O. (2019). Angebot und Nachfrage politischer Kommunikation in Sozialen Netzwerkdiensten. *merz | medien + erziehung*, 63(6), 40–52.
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Abstract

The opportunities for people to obtain political information or express themselves politically have increased significantly in recent years – mainly, but not exclusively, because of social media such as Facebook and Twitter. (Social) media are not only frequently used; they are also often at the center of political and societal debates. For example, citizens and political actors all over the world are discussing how influential, balanced or trustworthy (social) media are and whether (social) media services have to be regulated. More importantly, several theoretical approaches of communication science suggest that people adapt their behavior, opinions or attitudes to these (social) media-related perceptions. However, systematic attempts to structure and empirically analyze (social) media perceptions as well as their causes and consequences are rare. Therefore, this research project investigates how political actors and citizens perceive (social) media and what causes and consequences their perceptions have. For this purpose, a research model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions was developed, based on theoretical approaches of communication science and the current state of research. To test some of the assumptions of the research model, eleven quantitative surveys among political actors and citizens were conducted. More precisely, Bundestag members were surveyed four times, city councilors and political communication practitioners once each. German citizens were surveyed twice in a panel study and once in a comparative study together with Greek citizens. The results of these studies resulted in six studies published in peer-reviewed journals. These studies show how (social) media perceptions vary over time, across borders, between different organizations, at different political levels and between political actors and citizens. In addition, differences in the perceptions regarding Facebook and Twitter as well as regarding different reference groups became clear. Moreover, different relationships of the research model were supported: Social media perceptions affect how intensively and in which way political actors use social media. Furthermore, perceptions of (social) media affect how citizens evaluate media restrictions and what opinions they attribute to people from another country. Various factors on micro-, meso- and macro-level seem to influence the development of these perceptions: The results show that the size of political parties partially influences the (social) media perceptions of politicians. Moreover, factors at macro-level also appear to be relevant, as the (social) media perceptions of Greeks and Germans differ. This paper summarizes and connects the results of this research project, discusses the project's contribution to political communication research, makes suggestions for further research and highlights implications for political communication practices.

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1 Introduction

The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States of America in November 2016 was a surprise for many people all over the world. Like his predecessor Barack Obama, Trump spent a significant amount of money on micro targeting advertisement on social media, specifically on Facebook. For this purpose, Trump engaged the services of the British data analysis firm Cambridge Analytica. In the aftermath of the election, Cambridge Analytica claimed that their data analyses played a crucial role in Trump's unexpected election success (Grassegger & Krogerus, 2016). Even Trump himself claimed that social media helped him to win the election (McCormick, 2016). However, empirical analyses have shown that the actual influence of social media was overstated in the presidential election (e.g., Groshek & Koc-Michalska, 2017; Guess, Nyhan, & Reifler, 2020). Nevertheless, the public debate about the influence of social media led to a change in Facebook's data policies (Bruns, 2019a), to a decline in Facebook's reputation (Eisenegger, 2018) and to a reduction of citizens' Facebook usage (Brown, 2020; Perrin, 2018). On the other hand, many political actors from Germany and other countries continue to use Facebook and other social media services intensively (Bitkom, 2017). Moreover, they invested heavily in social media advertising during election campaigns (e.g., Dachwitz & Mrohs, 2019).

The Cambridge Analytica scandal is only one example of how citizens and political actors develop perceptions of social media services and react to these perceptions. In this case, perceptions of the political influence of social media services are particularly relevant: These presumed influences could be one reason why citizens reduced their Facebook usage and political actors communicate more frequently via social media services. However, besides presumed media influences, people can develop several other perceptions regarding traditional media and social media services. For example, people can develop perceptions of the communicators, the content or the audience of (social) media.¹ Theoretical approaches of communication science like the influence of presumed influence effect (Gunther & Storey, 2003), the hostile media effect (Vallone, Ross, & Lepper, 1985) or the persuasive press inference (Gunther, 1998) suggest that (social) media-related perceptions can have real consequences. However, it is largely unclear what specific consequences result from which

¹ In the following, the term *(social) media* will be used to include both social media and traditional journalistic media.

perceptions and why political actors and citizens perceive (social) media the way they do. Thus, in line with the mentioned and other theoretical approaches, it is asked:

How do political actors and citizens perceive (social) media, and what are the causes and consequences of their perceptions?

An answer to this research question has theoretical and empirical implications: A theoretical research model is needed that systematizes the causes of (social) media perceptions, the (social) media perceptions themselves, the consequences of these perceptions and the relationships between these aspects. Such a research model should improve the theoretical groundwork of future studies and could be a noteworthy step towards a comprehensive theory of (social) media perception, which is missing so far (e.g., Tsftati & Cohen, 2013, p. 11). In order to develop this research model, the theoretical background and the state of research of the causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions have to be reviewed. The review and the development of the research model will be presented in chapter 2.

In the empirical part of this research project, several relationships of the proposed research model and some of the identified research gaps are analyzed. Therefore, eleven quantitative surveys were conducted (see chapter 3), which resulted in six publications. Four focal points of these empirical studies can be highlighted:

- *Analysis of different groups of respondents:* Six of the eleven quantitative surveys focused on the (social) media perceptions of important political actors – in particular, on Bundestag members, city councilors and political communication practitioners (i.e., professionals whose aim is to influence the public opinion about collectively binding decisions). The other five surveys focused on citizens and their (social) media perceptions. German citizens were interviewed in the majority of these surveys. In one comparative survey, Greek and German citizens were surveyed. This allows to identify similarities and differences between different groups of respondents.
- *Analysis of different (social) media perceptions:* The empirical studies focused on different (social) media perceptions. In particular, political actors' and citizens' perceptions of (social) media contents, (social) media services, (social) media audiences and (social) media effects as well as the (causal) relationships between some of these perceptions were analyzed. The empirical analyses of these perceptions show that not only the most often researched perceptions are relevant explanatory factors (e.g., third-person perception,

hostile media perception), but also perceptions that are less often focused on (e.g., perceived audience expectations).

- *Analysis of different (social) media services:* In most of the empirical studies both Facebook and Twitter were analyzed, which can be regarded as two of the most important social media services for political communication. The analysis of perceptions of both services is important, because Facebook and Twitter differ, for example, in their functionality, their reach and their users (e.g., Mellon & Prosser, 2017). Thus, perceptions towards Facebook and Twitter as well as the causes and consequences of these perceptions might be different. In addition, two studies have examined perceptions of news media and online media in general. This allows comparisons between perceptions of journalistic media and social media services.
- *Analysis over time:* Although a structural change of political communication can be observed for several years (Vowe, 2020), longitudinal studies of (social) media perceptions are rare (e.g., Bernhard, Dohle, & Vowe, 2014; Elmelund-Præstekær, Hopmann, & Nørgaard, 2011; Pontzen, 2013). Such studies are important, for example, to show whether and how fast the mediatization of politics (Strömbäck, 2008) is developing. Therefore, Bundestag members were surveyed four times between 2012 and 2016. Moreover, citizens were surveyed in a panel survey in 2012 and 2013.

The results of the individual empirical studies will be summarized in chapter 4. In order to answer the research question, the results of the individual empirical studies will be connected in chapter 5. Moreover, specific suggestions for follow-up research will be made. Finally, concluding remarks on the research program's contribution to political communication research and its implications for political communication practices will be made (chapter 6).

2 Theoretical background and state of research

In this chapter, the theoretical background and the state of research on which this project is based will be reviewed in three steps. First, the research on (social) media perceptions will be reviewed and systematized (chapter 2.1). Second, it will be discussed which factors could influence specific (social) media perceptions (chapter 2.2). Third, the research on the consequences of (social) media perceptions will be reviewed and systematized (chapter 2.3).

Based on these three steps, a research model of the causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions will be developed (chapter 2.4).

2.1 (Social) media perceptions

Before the research on selected (social) media perceptions will be discussed, the *term perception* has to be explained. The term has its roots in psychology. To approach the term, one has to understand how people react on their environment. People are continuously exposed to, for example, light, sound, taste or smell. With their senses, they register these environmental influences in their central nervous systems. This “simple awareness due to the stimulation of a sense organ” (Schacter, Gilbert, & Wegner, 2012, p. 123) is called sensation. In the brain of people, these sensations are organized, identified and interpreted. This “organization, identification and interpretation of a sensation in order to form a mental representation” (Schacter et al., 2012, p. 123) is called perception. In other words, perceptions are attempts to understand environmental influences. Thus, perceptions are subjective phenomena as well as beliefs, presumptions, assumptions or expectations.²

Moreover, according to Johns and Saks (2014), perceptions consist of three components. (1) *The perceiver* is the person who is aware of a stimulus and accordingly starts to perceive. (2) *The target* is the object or the person who is perceived. (3) *The situation* in which the person encounters the object is also relevant because the situation determines whether a sensation is transported to the brain and thus a perception arises.

In the following, this work will focus on (*social*) *media perceptions*, i.e., perceptions of social media and traditional journalistic media. Thus, the target component of perception is information about (social) media. This refers to information about professional journalistic media such as newspapers, radio, television or journalistic news websites, but also to information about social media.³ Information about (social) media can be received through

² The mentioned terms are often used more or less synonymously, for example, in reviews on the research of media perceptions (e.g., McLeod et al., 2017; Tsifti & Cohen, 2013). However, in comparison to the other terms, the term perception is more strongly based on measurable sensations. For example, the term belief is rooted in theology and can be defined as “mental state of presumed truth” (Schacter et al., 2012, p. 466). Thus, beliefs do not necessarily have a measurable core.

³ Social media services such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram can be defined as “Internet-based, disentrained, and persistent channels of masspersonal communication facilitating perceptions of interactions among users, deriving value primarily from user-generated content” (Carr & Hayes, 2015, p. 49; see also Carr and Hayes (2015) for a general discuss about the term social media).

direct exposure to (social) media. However, people can also get information about (social) media without being exposed to it, for example, through interpersonal communication about (social) media.

Although social scientists have focused for years on media perceptions and in recent years also on social media perceptions, to my knowledge, there is no comprehensive *systematization of (social) media perceptions*. Such a systematization is an important component for the development of a theory of (social) media perceptions – a theory that is currently lacking (e.g., Tsfati & Cohen, 2013).

There are two possible approaches to build a systematization of (social) media perceptions. (1) A *deductive approach* would examine models of (social) media communication in order to identify one or more systematizations that meaningfully explain today's (social) media communication and derive from it, which (social) media perceptions should be relevant. The advantage of this approach is that possible research gaps could be identified (e.g., specific perceptual processes that have not yet been investigated). The major disadvantage of this deductive approach is that research studies or traditions would have to be neglected if these aspects were not mentioned in the chosen model (e.g., if the influence of (social) media communication is not considered in the original model). (2) An *inductive approach* would review studies of perceptions of (social) media and try to systematize these perceptions. The advantage of this approach is that the actual state of research about perceptions is reviewed. The disadvantage is that this systematization does not necessarily refer to established models of (social) media communication and can be somewhat arbitrary. Because of the different strengths and weaknesses of both approaches, a combination was chosen in the present case. First, the research of (social) media perceptions was reviewed. Second, it was examined whether the identified perceptions can be assigned to an established systematization of (social) media communication.

The *review of studies on (social) media perceptions* revealed that the following (social) media perceptions are probably the most often researched. Recent reviews of media perceptions focus on (1) trust in (social) media and its communicators, (2) perceptions of (social) media content – in particular, hostile media perceptions – and (3) perceptions of the influence of (social) media – in particular, third-person perceptions (McLeod, Wise, & Perryman, 2017; Tsfati & Cohen, 2013). These reviews neglect (4) perceptions of the (social) media audience, although these perceptions have a long research tradition: For example, perceptions of the audience were

considered by Gunther (1998) in his theory of persuasive press inference. In addition, there are first systematizations of perceptions of the (co)audience (Dohle, 2017a; Hartmann & Dohle, 2005), which underline the relevance of these perceptions. Finally, several studies focus on (5) perceptions of the (social) media services itself. In particular, these studies highlight the functionalities of (social) media services and analyze how suitable these services are perceived for specific purposes (e.g., Bernhard et al., 2014; Nuernbergk & Schmidt, 2020).⁴

The review of *established systematizations of (social) media communication* shows that reflections on how communication works go back to Aristoteles (K. Merten, 1977, pp. 14–15). Some communication models are rather simple (e.g., Lasswell, 1948), others rather complex (e.g., Maletzke, 1963). Moreover, some models aim to systematize the structural change of communication (Vowe, 2020). However, the identified (social) media perceptions can best be assigned to *Lasswell’s* (1948) well-known, but rather simple *model of communication*: “Who, says what, in which channel, to whom, with what effect?” Accordingly, Lasswell (1948) differentiates communication into five components – communicators, contents, media channels, audiences and effects. The most often researched (social) media perceptions can be assigned to these components (see table 1).

Table 1: Systematization of the most researched (social) media perceptions

Lasswell (1948)	Communication components	(Social) media perceptions
Who?	Communicators	Perceived trust
Says what?	Contents	Hostile media perception
In which channel?	(Social) media services	Perceived suitability
To whom?	Audiences	Perceived (co)audience
With what effect?	Effects	Third-person perception

Several scholars have criticized Lasswell’s model (for an overview: Sapienza, Iyer, & Veenstra, 2015). For example, McQuail and Windahl (1983, pp. 14–15) mentioned:

“The Lasswell Formula shows a typical trait of early communication models: it more or less takes for granted that the communicator has some intention of influencing the receiver and, hence, that communication should be traded mainly as a persuasive process. It is also assumed that messages always have effects. Models such as this have surely contributed to the tendency to exaggerate the effects of, especially, mass communication.”

⁴ It can be argued that the term “perception” does not fit perfectly for all perceptions mentioned. For example, perceptions of the influence of (social) media can also be described as presumptions of these influences, which becomes even clearer if one focuses on theories like the “influence of *presumed* influence” (Gunther & Storey, 2003). However, following McLeod et al. (2017) as well as Tsifti and Cohen (2013), the term perception is used as a general term.

Others have criticized the selection of components as arbitrary (e.g., K. Merten, 1974), added other components (e.g., Braddock, 1958) or criticized the model for not considering the reciprocal relationships between the components (e.g., K. Merten, 1977). Furthermore, dynamic aspects of communication (Vowe, 2020) as well as characteristics of specific social media services are not taken into account. However, a recent discussion of the legacy of Lasswell's model for communication science concluded that the "construct is inherently flexible enough to meet the theoretical needs of today's scholars" (Sapienza et al., 2015, p. 617). Thus, it seems reasonable to structure the identified (social) media perceptions along the components of the communication model, as long as the relationships between the perceptions and the characteristics of social media services will be considered.

In the following, the most prominent theoretical approaches and state of research of individuals' perceptions regarding the *communicators* in (social) media (chapter 2.1.1), the (social) media *contents* (chapter 2.1.2), the (social) media *services* (chapter 2.1.3), the (social) media *audiences* (chapter 2.1.4) and the *effects* of (social) media (chapter 2.1.5) will briefly be presented. Moreover, the *relationships* between these perceptions will be presented (chapter 2.1.6). In each chapter, the presentation is limited to the most often researched perceptions. Specifics of social media are highlighted if necessary. Mostly, the focus lies on relevant theoretical approaches and key empirical results in the field of political communication. Wherever possible, the results of studies from Germany are mentioned.

2.1.1 Perceptions of (social) media communicators

The functioning of modern societies is largely dependent on a minimum level of public trust in the news media and its communicators (Kohring, 2004, pp. 11–12). It is therefore not surprising that trust⁵ in media services is one of the most often researched media perceptions (McLeod et al., 2017, p. 42) and probably the most often researched perception of (social) media communicators. In contrast, trust in user-generated-content in social media has rarely been studied (e.g., Wang, Min, & Han, 2016). This chapter will briefly review the state of research on trust in (social) media communicators. Other perceptions that would also fit in this chapter

⁵ Media trust is often discussed with related concepts such as media credibility or media trustworthiness or opposing concepts such as media distrust, media cynicism or media skepticism (e.g., McLeod et al., 2017, p. 41; Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 141). In the following, the differentiations of the concepts are not specifically addressed.

like the perceived attractiveness of the communicator (e.g., Antheunis & Schouten, 2011) will not be discussed.

The concept of trust is based on *several characteristics*: Trust is a voluntary relationship between a trustee (i.e., the communicator) and a trustor (i.e., the audience). This relationship is asymmetric, because the trustee has skills, knowledge or resources that the trustor is missing (e.g., time). The trustor voluntarily becomes dependent on the trustee, which involves the risk that the trustee exploits their power, so that the decisions of the trustor are based on false/incomplete information (see, e.g., Jakob, 2012, pp. 96–97; Tsfaty & Cohen, 2013).

In this line, *trust in news media* can be defined as “the willingness of the audience to be vulnerable to news content based on the expectation that the media will perform in a satisfactory manner” (Hanitzsch, van Dalen, & Steindl, 2018, p. 5). The definition also applies to trust in news on social media that are disseminated by media organizations. According to Kohring and Matthes (2007), trust in news media has four dimensions: Trust in the *selectivity of topics* highlights the selection of relevant topics and events; trust in the *selectivity of facts* focuses on the contextualization of the selective topic and events; trust in the *accuracy of depictions* refers to the correctness of verifiable facts; and trust in *journalistic assessment* focuses on journalists’ evaluations. Based on these four dimensions, Kohring and Matthes (2007) develop a widespread scale for the measurement of trust in news media (for a recent adaptation and test of the scale: Prochazka & Schweiger, 2019).

If the information is disseminated by a (non-)journalistic individual on social media, *interpersonal trust* becomes relevant, which can be defined as “expectancy held by an individual or a group that the word, promise, verbal or written statement of another individual or group can be relied upon” (Rotter, 1967, p. 651). Whether people trust the information a person has shared depends on their proximity to the disseminator (Strömbäck et al., 2020, p. 146). Firstly, the proximity can serve as a cue to the credibility of the disseminated information. Secondly, in the case where the information was originally posted by an organization and was only shared by a person, the proximity to the disseminator can also serve as a cue for the credibility of the organization that originally posted the information. Turcotte, York, Irving, Scholl, and Pingree (2015, p. 524) illustrate this using Facebook as an example:

“Since Facebook users are often confronted by abundant social and news information from a wide variety of sources of varying credibility within the same news feed, they may feel the need to employ cues to reduce the cognitive burden of deciding how much to trust these sources. One potentially useful and always available cue about the trustworthiness of these media sources is the trustworthiness of the friend who shared the link. If that friend is believed to be highly

knowledgeable and trustworthy about public affairs, these positive evaluations may transfer to the media source.”

In contrast to trust in news media, established measurement for the level of interpersonal trust on social media does not exist so far. In most studies, the *generalized trust* in other people is used (e.g., Granow et al., 2020). However, this generalized trust does not measure the trust in the own Facebook friends or in specific Facebook friends who have shared certain information. But it is this specific trust that should be decisive in social media. A more differentiated approach is presented by *management research*: According to Wang et al. (2016), interpersonal trust on social media has four dimensions: These dimensions refer to social media users’ perceptions regarding the (1) integrity/honesty, (2) ability/competence, (3) benevolence and (4) judgement of their Facebook friends. However, these dimensions of interpersonal trust in social media users have yet to be translated into a scale that is used in communication research.

Several *moderators* influence the trust level in media, as a recent overview indicates (McLeod et al., 2017). For example, some journalistic practices (e.g., the use of anonymous sources), negative political coverage and the tone of the communicator can decrease trust in media. Moreover, individual factors like age, gender, education and the political ideology tend to have an effect: Older conservative men who are educated tend to have low levels of trust in news media (McLeod et al., 2017). Moreover, trust in news media is influenced by the generalized interpersonal trust (Granow et al., 2020; Matthes & Kohring, 2003) and by the perception that the disseminator of the information on social media is an opinion leader (Turcotte et al., 2015; for contradictory results, see Kyewski, 2018).

Strömbäck et al. (2020) conceptualized media trust at *different levels of analysis*. According to them, people can develop trust to (1) media contents, (2) journalists, (3) individual media brands, (4) media types and (5) news media in general.⁶ All of these dimensions are frequently analyzed in empirical studies. German communication scholars have increased their attention to media trust especially after public accusations of the “lying press”, which came up during the so-called refugee crisis in 2015. For example, the “Mainzer Langzeitstudie Medienvertrauen” (e.g., Granow et al., 2020; Jakob et al., 2019; Schultz, Jakob, Ziegele, Quiring, & Schemer, 2017; Ziegele et al., 2018) have focused on trust of German citizens in

⁶ One could argue that trust in media content is part of perceptions of media content (chapter 2.1.2) and trust in media types or brands is part of perceptions of media services (chapter 2.1.3). In my opinion, however, these dimensions of trust focus also on the people behind the media content, media types and media brands. If people, for example, do not trust the reporting on refugees, they do not trust, strictly speaking, the communicators of this reporting.

(social) media for a few years. They have shown, for example, that the *general media trust* is high among German citizens: While 44 percent of the people in Germany perceived in 2018 that you can trust the media when it comes to important issues, only 22 percent perceived that you cannot trust the media. This general media trust increased in the past years. However, the *trust in different types of (social) media* varies. For example, people have more trust in public-service broadcasters and newspapers than in online informational services or private broadcasters. Precisely, in 2018, about two-thirds of the people in Germany trusted the public-service broadcasters and regional newspapers, but only 17 percent trusted private television broadcasters and only eleven percent trusted the Internet in general. Even less Germans, between four and five percent, trusted news on social media services and video platforms. Moreover, the *trust of media coverage of specific issues* varies: For example, in 2018, only 24 percent of the people in Germany trusted and 35 percent distrusted news coverage about the criminality of refugees. News coverage about the diesel scandal was more trusted, as 35 percent of the Germans trusted and 26 percent distrusted this coverage (Jakob et al., 2019). Furthermore, in comparison to other perceptual phenomena, trust in media is more often analyzed *over time*. For example, Hanitzsch et al. (2018) analyzed the public trust in press between 1981 and 2014. They found that the public trust in press declined in about half of the 45 analyzed countries. The most dramatic decline was observed in the United States. In other countries, for example in Germany, the public trust in press increased over time.

Even though the theoretical and empirical investigation of trust in (social) media is intensive, more theoretical and empirical work is needed to understand the differences between trust in information disseminated by media organizations and trust in information disseminated by individuals. Moreover, more work is needed to understand how both trust concepts are related.

2.1.2 Perceptions of (social) media content

Much research exists on the perceptions of (social) media content. Studies have analyzed, for example, how users perceive news values (e.g., Weber & Wirth, 2013) or how they perceive the quality of news articles (e.g., Urban & Schweiger, 2014). The probably most often researched perception of (social) media content is the *hostile media effect* (Vallone et al., 1985). This is shown, for example, by Walter, Cody, and Ball-Rokeach (2018), who have analyzed all empirical studies which were published in the *Journal of Communication*. They show that the

hostile media effect was one of the most often researched theories in this journal after the millennium. Therefore, this chapter will focus on the research on the hostile media effect, although other perceptions of (social) media contents are also relevant.

The hostile media effect can be defined as “the tendency for individuals with a strong preexisting attitude on an issue to perceive that ostensibly neutral, even-handed media coverage of the topic is biased against their side and in favor of their antagonists’ point of view” (Perloff, 2015, p. 707). Thus, the “effect” is not an effect of media content, but a response to media content. That is why many scholars speak of a hostile media perception or a hostile media phenomenon (the terms typically have a similar meaning; Feldman, 2017, p. 549).

However, (social) media content is rarely entirely neutral or objective. According to the *relative hostile media effect* (Gunther, Christen, Liebhart, & Chia, 2001; Gunther, Miller, & Liebhart, 2009), individuals with opposing attitudes tend to perceive unbalanced (social) media content as biased, but tend to disagree about the intensity of the distortion. Specifically, the divergent groups agree that the biased content is indeed biased in one direction, but both groups will perceive the content as relatively biased against their side.

Hostile media effects are, on the one hand, closely connected to the concept of “*motivated reasoning*” (Kunda, 1990), according to which individuals want to protect their prior attitudes, and contradict, on the other hand, the concept of “*assimilation bias*” (Lord, Ross, & Lepper, 1979), according to which individuals remember and focus on information that confirm their own position. All these concepts have in common that individuals are not passive receivers of (social) media content who are similarly influenced by media content. Hence, the hostile media effect contradicts simplistic and outdated ideas of media influence (e.g., the “*magic bullet model*” or the “*hypodermic needle model*”). Instead, individuals are treated as an active audience (Gunther, 2017).

Three *conditions* apply for the hostile media effect (Gunther, 2015): The effect is associated with controversial issues; the effect becomes real among involved partisans; and the effect is most likely when individuals perceive that the content reaches a large audience (see chapter 2.1.6). Empirically, several studies were able to detect hostile media perceptions (for overviews, Feldman, 2017; Gunther, 2015, 2017; Krämer, 2016; McLeod et al., 2017; Perloff, 2015). A meta-analysis by Hansen and Kim (2011) showed that the effect size is noteworthy ($r = .30$) and persists regardless of the estimated media channels or used methodology. The hostile media effect is influenced, for example, by the presumed reach of the message (e.g., Gunther &

Liebhart, 2006; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; see chapter 2.1.6), by different constructs of individuals' involvement (e.g., Arlt, Dalmus, & Metag, 2019; Choi, Yang, & Chang, 2009; Matthes, 2013), by individuals' identification with an in-group and by an out-group membership of the message source (e.g., Gunther, McLaughlin, Gotlieb, & Wise, 2017; Hartmann & Tanis, 2013; Reid, 2012).

Empirical studies from Germany have proven the hostile media effect especially in the context of the political conflicts about refugees (Arlt et al., 2019; Arlt & Wolling, 2016; Bernhard, 2018; M. Merten & Dohle, 2019), but also in the context of the conflicts about aircraft noise (Post, 2015, 2017), study fees (Dohle & Hartmann, 2008), change of the energy sector (Zerback, 2016), among Jihadists and former Islamic fundamentalists (Baugut & Neumann, 2020; Neumann, Arendt, & Baugut, 2018) and among right-wing-extremists (Baugut & Neumann, 2019).

Hostile media perceptions were mostly researched and detected in the context of offline media, as a recent review of the hostile media research concluded: "there is scarcely any research exploring how the Internet or the plethora of social media give rise to hostile media effects" (Perloff, 2015, p. 719). However, few studies show that *hostile media perceptions persist in social media*: The probably most comprehensive approach to analyze hostile media perceptions in the era of social media is presented by Kyewski (2018). In three *experimental studies*, he has shown that people's hostile media perception is not influenced by the news environment (social media vs. homepage; see also M. Kim, 2015), the source of information (media brand on social media vs. friend on social media), the reach of the post on social media (low reach vs. high reach) or the sentiment of comments on the social media post (pro vs. contra vs. mixed). In contrast, T. K. Lee, Kim, and Coe (2018) have shown experimentally that the disseminator of news on social media is relevant for the hostile media perception: People perceive news articles as more biased when it is shared by a supporter of the opposing party instead of a supporter of the own party. They show also that the number of the disseminator's Twitter followers, which could be interpreted as a proxy for the reach of the information, strengthen the hostile media perceptions. Moreover, Gearhart, Moe, and Zhang (2020) have experimentally demonstrated that the sentiments of comments on social media can impact hostile media perceptions. Similar results are shown by Houston, Hansen, and Nisbett (2011) for comments on news websites.

In addition, Rojas, Barnidge, and Abril (2016) have shown with *survey data* that people who often use social media have stronger hostile media perceptions. Rojas et al. (2016) assume that

this correlation exists for two reasons. First, people may be exposed more often to information on social media that they disagree with and hence develop hostile media perceptions. If they successfully have filtered out unwelcome content, they may secondly justify their filtering process by the perception that the media are biased. However, it remains an empirical question, why social media use correlates with stronger hostile media perceptions.

This brief overview makes clear that more studies are needed that focus on the interplay between social media and news media to gain a better understanding of how different forms of presentation influence hostile media perceptions.

2.1.3 Perceptions of (social) media services

This chapter deals with individuals' perceptions of *(social) media services*. For example, individuals develop perceptions of (social) media services with regard to the (social) media's suitability for specific purposes: Producers of (social) media content have to decide which service is most suitable to communicate in a specific way; receivers of (social) media content have to decide which service is most suitable for fulfilling their user motives. Thus, perceptions of (social) media suitability are closely connected to the uses and gratifications approach (for an overview, e.g., Sommer, 2019).

In comparison to the other four groups of perceptions, *fewer empirical studies* exist regarding the perceived suitability of (social) media services. For example, Bernhard et al. (2014) and Dohle and Bernhard (2014a) have shown that *German citizens and German parliamentarians* evaluate newspapers and television as better than news websites to get political information. Both groups perceive that Facebook and Twitter are only partially suitable for this purpose. It is likely that this evaluation has changed in recent years, as social media services have penetrated societies all over the world (Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andi, & Nielsen, 2020) However, there is currently no data on how citizens or politicians the suitability of social media services.

In addition, Neuberger, Langenohl, and Nuernbergk (2015) have shown that *journalists* evaluate the suitability of social media services differently depending on the purpose of usage. For example, journalists perceive that Facebook is suitable for discussions about news, Twitter is suitable for real-time interactions during a TV show and blogs are suitable for longer-term discussions, which are detached from the daily business. Nuernbergk and Schmidt (2020) also

investigated how journalists perceive the suitability of Twitter for different purposes. They show that journalists evaluate Twitter as suitable for informational activities (e.g., to get new information or to monitor the development of an issue), but not for communication activities (e.g., to exchange information with colleagues or to address specific persons).

The results indicate individuals perceive that *social media has different functionalities than traditional media*. In particular, social media services combine several characteristics of other traditional media, as Robert Heinrich, former campaign manager of the German party Alliance 90/The Greens, puts it in a nutshell: “It is radio, it is television, it is image, it is text, it is conversation, it is social space, it is everything” (Evers, 2019, p. 237; own translation). Besides this hybridization (Vowe, 2020), algorithms play an increasingly important role in social media. How people perceive and understand these algorithms will be a challenge in the next years (Hargittai, Gruber, Djukaric, Fuchs, & Brombach, 2020), especially, because more and more algorithms are based on artificial intelligence. These algorithms can be used, for example, to personalize the information presented. Potential negative consequences of this automated decision-making are intensively discussed under the term “filter bubble” (Bruns, 2019b; Pariser, 2011). However, automated filtering processes can also have positive impacts on the perceived functionality of social media – for example, because irrelevant information is not presented. Hence, Araujo, Helberger, Kruikemeier, and de Vreese (2020) have analyzed how people evaluate decisions about news recommendations made by humans or an artificial intelligence. Their results show that decisions by humans are perceived as equally useful, fair, and risky compared to decisions made by an artificial intelligence. However, it remains to be seen whether the perceived suitability of different (social) media services will change if artificial intelligence further changes the functionalities of these services.

2.1.4 Perceptions of (social) media audience

Maletzke (1963, p. 29) assumed already in the 1960s that recipients had “sometimes (...) more or less clear ideas about the scope and composition of the entire audience” (own translation). These *(co)audience perceptions* can be defined as “individual’s subjective assumptions about the audiences and its characteristics” (Dohle, 2017a, p. 2). They can be formed during the reception of (social) media content, but also independently (Dohle, 2017a, p. 2).

Coaudience perceptions can be differentiated into four dimensions⁷: First, individuals can develop perceptions of the *size* of the (social) media audience (Dohle, 2017a). They can roughly estimate how many people were reached by (social) media services. On social media, individuals can get a better, but incomplete picture of the audience through popularity cues (see chapter 2.2.1). Second, individuals can develop perceptions of the *simultaneity of (social) media use* (Dohle, 2017a). Since more and more broadcasters have own online media libraries and video-on-demand-services gain importance, the perceived simultaneity of (social) media use may decrease. On the other hand, new information technologies have enabled people to use two or more screens at the same time (“*second screening*”; e.g., watching a political talk show and reading tweets about the show at the same time; Gil de Zúñiga & Liu, 2017), which may increase peoples’ perceptions of simultaneity. Third, individuals can develop perceptions of the *composition* of the (social) media audience (Dohle, 2017a). These perceptions refer, for example, to socio-demographics, values or attitudes of the (social) media audience. Third, producers of (social) media content can develop *audience expectations* (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). Journalists and politicians, for example, develop perceptions of the expectations of their (social) media audience (Heise, Loosen, Reimer, & Schmidt, 2014; Loosen, Reimer, & Hölig, 2020; Lüders, Følstad, & Waldal, 2014).

The empirical focus on perceptions of the (social) media audience differs. Studies that analyzed perceptions of the *audience of (social) media services in general* (e.g., Bernhard et al., 2014; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a) often focused on the size of the audience. For example, German politicians were asked in 2012/2013 about their presumptions how many people in Germany use different (social) media services to get informed (Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a). Results show that politicians perceived that most people in Germany use television or newspapers for this purpose. The audience of news websites and Facebook was estimated as moderate, the audience of Twitter or weblogs as low. German citizens have largely similar perceptions in 2012 (Bernhard et al., 2014).

A second bulk of studies focused on perceptions of the *audience of specific (social) media content produced by others* (e.g., Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004). These studies often have an experimental design, in which participants were asked to estimate the

⁷ Dohle and Hartmann (2005) also consider the *reception experience of the coaudience*, but not audience expectations. As the reception experience is closely connected to the perceptions of (social) media effects (Hartmann & Dohle, 2005, p. 295; Dohle, 2017a), this dimension is not mentioned in this chapter, but in chapter 2.1.5.

reach of specific (social) media articles. These studies often combine several perceptual phenomena (see chapter 2.1.6).

A third bulk of studies refers to the perceptions of the *audience of self-produced (social) media content* (e.g., Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011). On the one hand, these studies often refer to the concept of the “*imagined audience*” (Litt, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011), which can be defined as “the mental conceptualization of the people with whom we are communicating” (Litt, 2012, p. 331). Thus, the focus is often on the composition dimension of audience perceptions. Empirical studies showed that individuals either have a broad abstract audience in mind (e.g., strangers) or a more specific audience (Brake, 2012; Litt & Hargittai, 2016; Marwick & boyd, 2011; Vitak, Blasiola, Patil, & Litt, 2015). The specific audience of citizens is mainly composed of personal ties (e.g., close friends), but also of professional ties (e.g., coworkers) and communal ties (e.g., people in a specific town; Litt & Hargittai, 2016). Individuals who use social media for professional purposes – for example, political actors or public relations practitioners – have mainly audience groups in mind with whom they have professional ties: For example, politicians state that their perceived audience on social media are citizens, other politicians and journalists (Hoffmann, Suphan, & Meckel, 2016; Larsson & Skogerbø, 2018). However, these imagined audiences can change with each post (Litt & Hargittai, 2016) and between different online platforms (J. Kim, Lewis, & Watson, 2018).

On the other hand, studies that focus on the perceptions of producers of (social) media content focus on their *perceived audience expectations*. This means that producers of (social) media content are asked to assess what their audience probably expects from them. These studies are mainly conducted in journalism research and show, for example, that journalists’ perceptions of audience expectations differ partly from the actual expectations of their audience (Heise et al., 2014; Loosen et al., 2020). By using social media, almost everybody can become a producer of media content, and, thus, develop perceptions of audience expectations. A study from Norway shows, for example, that politicians find it challenging to satisfy the expectations of their social media audience (Lüders et al., 2014).

This brief overview shows that perceptions of (social) media audiences are manifold. However, perceptions of (social) media audiences are rarely considered in political communication research compared to other perceptual phenomena.

2.1.5 Perceptions of (social) media effects

Perceptions regarding the effects of (social) media content are frequently studied in communication science. The most widespread theory about perceived media effects – and one of the most popular theories in communication research in the 21st century (Bryant & Miron, 2004; Valkenburg & Oliver, 2020) – is the *third-person effect* (Davison, 1983). Therefore, the focus of this chapter is mostly on the third-person effect and its developments, although there is, for example, a long research tradition on naïve media theories that also mentioned perceptions of media effects (e.g., the “*magic bullet model*”).

The third-person effect consists of *two components*: (1) Individuals tend to perceive that media content has a greater effect on others than on themselves (perceptual component or third-person perception); (2) this perceptual bias affects individuals’ cognitions, attitudes or behaviors (behavioral component or third-person behavior). More recent studies often focused only on individuals’ perceptions of (social) media influences on others (and not on the perceptual bias), because it seems to be that presumed influence on others alone is the less ambiguous and better predictor of potential effects (S. Chung & Moon, 2016; Schmierbach, Boyle, & McLeod, 2008).⁸ These studies refer to the *influence of presumed influence approach*, according to which “people perceive some influence of a message on others and then react to that perception of influence” (Gunther & Storey, 2003, p. 201; see chapter 2.3 for consequences).

As there are far more than 100 studies on the third-person perception, *meta-analyses* were conducted to synthesize the empirical evidence (Paul, Salwen, & Dupagne, 2000; Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008). The meta-analysis by Sun, Pan, and Shen (2008) indicated that the effect size of the perceptual bias is noteworthy ($r = .31$). Moreover, the meta-analyses indicated *moderators* that influence the size of the perceptual gap. These moderators can be differentiated into the characteristics of the message and the characteristics of the recipients (Sun, Pan, & Shen, 2008). On the one hand, for example, the more strongly individuals perceive that the (social) media content is undesirable and the lower they evaluate the quality of the source, the greater their perceptual bias. Moreover, individuals perceive similar or even stronger effects on themselves, if the media content is desirable (first person perception; Golan & Day, 2008). On the other hand, the bias increases, the stronger individuals perceive that others are vulnerable, (socially)

⁸ For example, if the third-person perception is used as independent variable, it remains unclear if the perceived influence on others or the perceived influence on self is responsible for possible consequences.

distant (“social distance corollary”; Perloff, 2002, 2009) and exposed to specific media content (see chapter 2.1.6 for the relationship with other perceptual phenomena).

Presumed influences of (social) media were frequently studied (for overviews, see, e.g., Brosius & Huck, 2008; Dohle, 2017b; Dohle & Bernhard, 2016; Gunther, Perloff, & Tsfati, 2008; Perloff, 1999, 2002, 2009; Sun, 2013; Tal-Or, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2009; Tsfati & Cohen, 2013). In the following, the focus will mainly be on results from empirical studies of political communication research with a German context.

Results show that the influence of *different (social) media services* is perceived differently. In Germany, citizens (Bernhard et al., 2014; Bernhard & Dohle, 2013, 2015a), national parliamentarians (Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a) and journalists (Bernhard & Dohle, 2014) perceived that offline media has more political influence than online media. Moreover, these groups considered news websites to be more influential than Facebook, which was considered as more influential than Twitter (Bernhard et al., 2014; Bernhard & Dohle, 2014, 2015b, 2018; Bernhard, Dohle, & Vowe, 2016; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a). The estimated political effect of Facebook and Twitter on the general public did not differ noteworthy between journalists, national and local politicians (Bernhard & Dohle, 2014, 2015b; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a). However, these groups perceive that *different target groups* are differently influenced by (social) media: Politicians and journalists, for example, tend to perceive that (social) media has more influence on journalists than on the general public or other politicians (Bernhard et al., 2016; Bernhard & Dohle, 2014, 2015b). Furthermore, in Germany, *third-person perceptions* were detected among journalists (Bernhard & Dohle, 2014), politicians (Bernhard & Dohle, 2015b), citizens (Bernhard et al., 2014; Bernhard & Dohle, 2013) as well as among extreme partisan groups like Jihadists and former Islamic fundamentalist (Baugut & Neumann, 2020; Neumann et al., 2018) or right-wing extremists (Baugut & Neumann, 2019). In line with the third-person perception, results show that politicians tend to perceive that the supporters of other parties were more influenced by online media than their own supporters (Marcinkowski & Metag, 2014) and that the Internet has more political influence on voters than on other politicians (Metag & Marcinkowski, 2012).

Third-person perceptions were also detected in *other countries*: In the United States, for example, the perceptual bias was detected in the context of political advertising (e.g., Cheng & Riffe, 2008), “fake news” (e.g., Jang & Kim, 2018), television debates (e.g., Wei, Lo, & Zhu, 2019), news coverage (e.g., Salwen & Driscoll, 1997) or in the context of specific social media

like Facebook (e.g., Lev-On, 2017). It is also worth noting a study that indicates that individuals can develop perceptions of the *influence of foreign media* on the inhabitants of a foreign country: Wei, Lo, and Golan (2017) have shown that Chinese people perceive that news in the United States about China have a strong influence on Americans.

In addition to studies relating to the third-person effect or influence of presumed influences, several studies relating to the concept of *mediatization of politics*⁹ (e.g., Kepplinger, 2002; Strömbäck, 2008) analyzed (German) politicians' and journalists' perceptions of media influences on politics (e.g., Fawzi, 2018; Maurer, 2011; Strömbäck, 2011; van Aelst et al., 2008; van Dalen & van Aelst, 2014). In most instances, these studies indicate that politicians and journalists perceive that the media has strong influences on political processes. Moreover, some researchers combine the mediatization of politics thesis with the influence of presumed influence approach in their theoretical arguments (e.g., Cohen, Tsfati, & Sheaffer, 2008).

2.1.6 Relationships between (social) media perceptions

Although many empirical studies show that (social) media perceptions are closely related, there exist only few theoretical attempts to link (social) media perceptions (e.g., Gunther, 1998; Huck & Brosius, 2007; Post, 2019; Schulz & Rössler, 2013; Tsfati & Cohen, 2013). Probably the most prominent theoretical approach that arranges the order of several media perceptions is the *persuasive press inference* (Gunther, 1998). The aim of the concept is to explain perceptions of the public opinion. According to the concept, individuals who are exposed to media content about a specific topic perceive the positive or negative slant of the content. This perception can be biased (hostile media perception). In most cases, individuals cannot consume all information about this topic. Because of the “law-of-small-numbers bias” (Tversky & Kahneman, 1971), individuals assume that the content which they are exposed to is representative for the mass media content about this topic in general (“extrapolation”; Gunther et al., 2001, p. 301). Accordingly, they perceive that many other people obtain this content through mass media (presumed reach) and were influenced by it (presumed influence). In turn, individuals perceive

⁹ The mediatization of politics can be defined as “a long-term process through which the importance of the media and their spill-over effects on political processes, institutions, organizations and actors has increased” (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014, p. 6).

that others adapt their opinion to the media content. Some studies tested (and largely confirmed) the assumptions of the persuasive press inference (e.g., Gunther et al., 2001; Zerback, 2016).

Moreover, many other studies that focus on the explanation of specific perceptual phenomena (e.g., the hostile media perception or the third-person perception) analyzed which other perceptual processes are related to these phenomena. These studies show, for example, that *media trust*¹⁰ is related to the *hostile media perception* and/or to *perceived media influences* (Choi et al., 2009; K. S. Kim, 2011; Tsfati & Cohen, 2005a; Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2011). Precisely, most of these studies show that “the more people mistrust the media, the more they tend to perceive media coverage as hostile to their point of view and the more they perceive news media to exert negative influence on others” (Tsfati & Cohen, 2013, p. 12).

In addition, experimental studies show that the *perceived reach* of media content influences *hostile media perceptions* (Gunther et al., 2009; Gunther, Edgerly, Akin, & Broesch, 2012; Gunther & Liebhart, 2006; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004; Schmitt, Gunther, & Liebhart, 2004). If individuals perceive that many other people receive a specific media content, individuals perceive that the content is biased against their opinion (for contrary results, see, e.g., Dohle & Hartmann, 2008). If they assume that only few people receive the content, the hostile media perception disappears. This is interpreted as an “assimilation bias” (e.g., Dohle & Hartmann, 2008; Gunther & Schmitt, 2004).

Moreover, studies show that the *perceived influence* of media content is related to its *perceived reach* (e.g., Eveland, Nathanson, Detenber, & McLeod, 1999; Gunther, Bolt, Borzekowski, Liebhart, & Dillard, 2006; Lambe & McLeod, 2005; Lim & Golan, 2011; Lin, 2014; Meirick, 2005a) and its *perceived hostility* (e.g., Choi et al., 2009; Post, 2017; Tsfati, 2007; Tsfati & Cohen, 2003, 2005b): The stronger individuals perceive that others were exposed to specific media content and the stronger they perceive that the content is biased against their opinion, the stronger they perceive that others were influenced by the content.

In addition, some studies show that the *perceived influence* and the *perceived suitability* are related to one another (Bernhard et al., 2016; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014b). For example, the more parliamentarians perceive that others were influenced by social media content, the more suitable

¹⁰ Moreover, Arpan and Raney (2003) as well as Gunther et al. (2017) analyzed the impact of different sources (e.g., newspaper from home town vs. newspaper from another town) on the hostile media perceptions. These studies also show that individuals have a stronger hostile media perception if the source is more distant. Although these studies did not measure individuals’ trust in both sources, it is possible, that the effects appear because of individuals’ different levels of trust in these media.

they evaluate the specific social media service for providing political information (Dohle & Bernhard, 2014b).

This brief summary shows that many (social) media perceptions correlate with each other. However, it is unclear, whether these relationships persist if all relationships are tested synonymously. Moreover, as most of the mentioned studies are based on cross-sectional data, the causal direction of effects is often unclear.

2.2 Causes of (social) media perceptions

Chapter 2.1 has shown that individuals develop different (social) media perceptions – either by using (social) media or without using it. In this chapter, the psychological reasons why people develop these perceptions will be pointed out (chapter 2.2.1). These reasons are located at the *micro-level*. However, individuals are embedded in organizational and/or societal contexts, which can influence their individual perceptions. For example, family contexts likely influence the (social) media perceptions of family members and organizational backgrounds likely influence the (social) media perceptions of organizational members. The relevance of these *meso-level* factors, specifically the influence of the organizational background on political actors' perceptions, will be discussed in chapter 2.2.2. Finally, *macro-level* factors such as the media system and the political system likely have an influence on meso- and micro-level factors. For example, country's regulation of (social) media likely influences organizational communication strategies, which may influence in turn individuals' perceptions. Which factors should be considered at the macro level will be mentioned in chapter 2.2.3.

2.2.1 Micro-level factors

There are several theoretical, mostly psychological, explanations for (social) media perceptions. So far, many of them have only been considered to explain certain perceptions, for example, the hostile media effect or the third-person perception. However, some of these theoretical approaches could also be helpful to explain other (social) media perceptions. The most prominent explanations for (social) media perceptions will be presented in this chapter. These

explanations can be distinguished in *motivational* and *cognitive* explanations (e.g., Tal-Or et al., 2009).¹¹

The most prominent motivational explanation is the concept of *self-enhancement*, according to which individuals want to maintain and strengthen their self-esteem (e.g., Meirick, 2005b). Therefore, they may perceive themselves (in contrast to others) as immune to negative (social) media influences. Self-enhancement processes may also lead people to justify their own (social) media usage, for example by assuming that many others also use (social) media services that may be perceived as indecent. Another motivational explanation is that people are motivated to *control and protect their inner self* (e.g., Perloff, 2009). Accordingly, people may assume that they were not influenced by negative (social) media content or that the communicators of their used (social) media services are trustworthy. A third motivational explanation focuses on the concept of *impression management* (e.g., Tal-Or & Drukman, 2010). According to this concept, individuals want to influence that others have a positive picture of themselves. For example, people may perceive (and state) that (social) media content did not influence them or that a specific (social) media content is hostile against their own opinion to be in line with the opinion of their peer.

Cognitive explanations often refer to naïve media theories (e.g., T. Naab, 2013; Stiehler, 1999). Accordingly, individuals “are naïve social scientists (...) who are motivated to make accurate estimations about how the world operates” (Tal-Or et al., 2009, p. 102). To make these estimations, individuals may take into account *stereotypes*, which can be defined as “cognitive shortcuts used to ascribe assumed attributes of out-groups, formed due to the limited information about the qualities of the out-group one may have” (Scharrer, 2002, p. 685). People, for example, may perceive which groups use specific (social) media services and how they were influenced by the content. *Media schemas* are another cognitive explanation (Perloff, 2009). Accordingly, people have simplistic ideas (or schemas) about the power of (social) media, about the communicators or the audiences of (social) media services. The *attribution theory* offers another explanation for (social) media perceptions (e.g., Gunther, 1991). According to the theory, individuals try to find causal explanations to their actions and the actions of others. When they search for explanations, they infer situational causes more often for explaining their

¹¹ Socio-demographics, predispositions and (political) attitudes are certainly also relevant for the development of specific (social) media perceptions. However, these factors will not be discussed in this chapter, because the influence of these factors does not appear to be uniform (but see chapter 2.1 for their influence on specific perceptions).

own negative actions and dispositional causes more often for the negative activities of others (“*fundamental attribution error*”; Eveland et al., 1999). Thus, individuals may perceive, for example, that other people were susceptible to populist communication, because they do not have the dispositional ability to process the content. The *self-categorization theory* and the *social identity theory* are also useful attempts to explain (social) media perceptions (Reid, 2012; Reid & Hogg, 2005): According to the theories, people see themselves either as a member of an in-group or of an out-group. Specific (social) media content can activate their group identification, which in turn, may trigger self-categorization processes, i.e., perceiving the (social) media content as hostile against their in-group and perceiving that out-group members were influenced by it.

Most of the mentioned explanations persist regardless of people’s exposure to specific (social) media content. However, if people are exposed to (social) media content, they can receive specific cues that may influence their perceptions. First, people can receive cues about the audience and the effects *through (social) media communicators* (e.g., Hartmann & Dohle, 2005) – for example, if the moderators of a television debate during an election campaign report that ‘millions of voters are following the debate and will take the debate into account in their voting decision’. Second, especially in social media, people can receive *popularity cues*, such as the number of likes, shares, and comments or the tenor of comments (e.g., Porten-Cheé, Haßler, Jost, Eilders, & Maurer, 2018). They may adapt their perceptions of the trustworthiness of (social) media communicators, the slant of (social) media content, the (social) media audience and the effect of (social) media to these popularity cues. Moreover, as many people use multiple (social) media services at the same time (“*second screening*”; e.g., Gil de Zúñiga & Liu, 2017), people can receive popularity cues while they are exposed to traditional mass media services (e.g., reading the tweets about a television debate).

Taken together, there are motivational and cognitive explanations for why people develop (social) media perceptions. Information gained from communicators or from popularity cues can also serve as proxies for certain (social) media perceptions.

2.2.2 Meso-level factors

Although meso-level factors are mostly not considered as explanatory factors for (social) media perceptions, it is plausible that these factors are of importance – especially for political actors

who belong to an organization. Besides other factors, the *size*, the *ideology* and the *status* of an organization should be relevant. Other meso-level factors, such as the family context, are also important, but will not be addressed in this chapter.

The *normalization and equalization theses* both assume that the size of political parties influences the parties' communication. However, the direction of the presumed effects differs. Precisely:

“The normalization hypothesis asserts that as the Internet develops, patterns of socioeconomic and political relationships on-line come to resemble those of the real world. Applied to political parties, this hypothesis implies that just as the major parties dominate the sphere of everyday domestic politics, so they come to dominate cyberspace” (Margolis, Resnick, & Wolfe, 1999, p. 26).

In contrast, the equalization thesis states that “the internet is offering minor parties a more equal footing to compete with their major counterparts” (Gibson & Ward, 1997, p. 17). Empirical studies show that the size of German parties not only influences the communication of the party (e.g., Datts, 2020), but also the communication of their members (e.g., Hinz, 2017). Moreover, it is plausible that the size also influences the (social) media perceptions of the organizations' members. Politicians of major parties might have, for example, more followers on social media and therefore have different perceptions of the reach and influence of their communication than politicians of minor parties.

The *ideology* of a political party may also influence the (social) media perceptions of its members and supporters. For example, for several reasons it seems obvious that the (social) media perceptions differ between politicians of populist parties and politicians of other parties. First, studies show that populist parties receive far more responses to their social media posts than other parties (for the case of the *AfD*, see, e.g., Datts, 2020; Evers, 2019; Jost, Maurer, & Haßler, 2020). Thus, politicians of populist parties may have different perceptions of the reach and influence of their posts than politicians of other parties. Second, research has shown that populist parties or its leaders more often attack elites or institutions like “the media” in their social media communication (Jost et al., 2020). One reason could be that politicians of populist parties distrust the media and have hostile media perceptions. Another, not necessarily competing explanation is that politicians of populist parties perceive that their audience expects this kind of communication, because people with populist worldviews distrust the media (Fawzi, 2019) and have hostile media perceptions (Schulz, Wirth, & Müller, 2020). Politicians probably want to satisfy these expectations with their communication.

Finally, the *status* of a political party might influence the (social) media perceptions of its members: Extraparliamentary opposition parties have less media attention than parties represented in parliament and governmental parties receive more media attention than parliamentary opposition parties do. Indeed, empirical studies show that members of opposition parties perceive more strongly than members of government parties that politicians need media attention (van Aelst et al., 2008). It is also possible that politicians of extraparliamentary or opposition parties perceive more strongly than politicians from governmental parties that the traditional mass media is biased against them and, therefore, less likely contact journalists (e.g., Matthes, Maurer, & Arendt, 2019). Moreover, some studies indicate that politicians from opposition parties more often use social media to distribute their messages than politicians from governmental parties (e.g., Hinz, 2017) – probably because they perceive that their efforts on social media are more promising than their attempt to be featured in the mass media.

The size, ideology and status of organizations are only three of many meso-level factors that may have an impact on individuals' (social) media perceptions. Since different factors can be observed in each organization, these factors should be considered in combination. However, there are situations in which these factors are largely identical (e.g., the parties' size and their parliamentary status in a grand coalition).

2.2.3 Macro-level factors

People are embedded in different societal contexts, which may have an influence on (social) media perceptions. Albeit macro-level factors are rarely used to explain (social) media perceptions, it is plausible that people in *different countries* have different (social) media perceptions, because of, for example, the country's political system, media system and political culture. Moreover, *within a country*, the political level may have an impact on the (social) media perceptions. For example, the perceptions of political actors working at local level, federal level or national level are likely different.

The *political systems* of countries can be differentiated into democratic systems, authoritarian systems and totalitarian systems (Merkel, 1999, p. 55). Western countries are almost exclusively democracies that can be differentiated into majoritarian democracies (i.e., the United States) and consensus democracies (i.e., Germany). In most instances, the former are two-party systems and the latter multi-party systems.

The *media systems* of Western countries can be differentiated into three types, according to the landmark study of Hallin and Mancini (2004)¹² (for Eastern countries, see, Hallin & Mancini, 2012): the liberal model (e.g., United States or Great Britain: high development of the mass press, low political parallelism, highly professionalized journalism, low state intervention), the polarized pluralist model (e.g., France, Italy, Spain: low development of the mass press, high political parallelism, low professionalized journalism, high state intervention) and the democratic corporatist model (e.g., German speaking countries: high development of the mass press, political parallelism, professionalization, state intervention; Hallin & Mancini, 2004, p. 299).

The *political culture* of a country can be defined as “the particular distribution of patterns of orientation toward political objects among the members of the nation“ (Almond & Verba, 1963, pp. 14–15). Almond and Verba (1963) outlined three ideal types of political cultures in the 1960s: a parochial political culture, a subject political culture and a participant political culture. These ideal types can be distinguished by different levels of political interest and participation. In addition, according to the cleavage theory (Lipset & Rokkan, 1967), the political culture is historically divided into four different lines of conflict: (1) owner vs. worker; (2) church vs. state; (3) urban vs. rural; (4) center vs. periphery. In the last years, new conflict lines have been added, for example, the conflict between materialists and post-materialists (Inglehart, 1971), between winners of globalization vs. losers of globalization (Kriesi et al., 2008) or between nationalists vs. globalists (Scotto, Sanders, & Reifler, 2018). In different countries, different lines of conflict prevail that determine the political culture of societies.

Besides the political system, the media system and the political culture, *other factors* such as the distribution of social media in a country (e.g., Newman, Fletcher, Kalogeropoulos, & Nielsen, 2019) or the economic situation of the country likely have an impact on individual (social) media perceptions.

The mentioned factors or the interaction of these factors likely influence individuals’ (social) media perceptions. For example, Hanitzsch et al. (2018) show that citizens who live in countries that belong to the liberal media system tend to have less trust in the press compared to citizens who live in countries with other media systems. Van Aelst and colleagues show that Belgian and Swedish politicians attribute much more political power to the mass media than Dutch or

¹² For a revision of the typology, see Brüggemann, Engesser, Büchel, Humprecht, and Castro (2014).

Danish politicians (van Aelst et al., 2008; van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011). The authors assume that the differences exist because of different numbers of seats in parliament. Accordingly, politicians who have more colleagues have a stronger “inter-MP competition” (Van Aelst & Walgrave, 2011, p. 306) and therefore attribute more political influence to the media. Moreover, Matthes and Beyer (2017) show that the people in Norway, the United States and France have different levels of hostile media perceptions regarding to news about immigration – probably due to different political immigration policies. However, many comparative studies did not consider or discuss the impact of the mentioned or other macro-level factors on the (social) media perceptions.

Macro-level factors also persist *within a country*. For example, political actors who work at different political levels within a country have different working conditions, which may also influence (social) media perceptions. For example, politicians at the local level have fewer financial and human resources and are less professionalized than politicians at state or national level – but they have a closer relationship to their constituencies (Fawzi, Baugut, & Reinemann, 2018). This could influence their (social) media perceptions. Metag and Marcinkowski (2012) show, for example, that local politicians evaluate online media as less important than politicians at state or national level. In contrast, the social media perceptions of German local and national politicians do not differ noteworthy in the studies of Bernhard et al. (2016) and Bernhard and Dohle (2015b).

Like meso-level factors, single macro-level factors should not be considered in isolation. Especially large-scale comparative studies should theoretically reflect and empirically control the potential influence of macro-level factors on (social) media perceptions.

2.3 Consequences of (social) media perceptions

Basis for the assumption that (social) media perceptions can have consequences is the well-known *Thomas theorem*: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas & Thomas, 1928, p. 572). According to the theorem, it is not only important how trustful, hostile, suitable, distributed or influential (social) media actually is. How people perceive (social) media is also (or even more) important. These perceptions can influence cognitions, perceptions, attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Tal-Or et al., 2009).

In this chapter, the *consequences of the mentioned (social) media perceptions will be systematized*. Therefore, previous systematizations or literature reviews of the consequences of specific (social) media perceptions were reviewed (e.g., Dohle, 2017a; Feldman, 2017; Gunther et al., 2008; Gunther, 2015, 2017; Perloff, 2015; Sun, Shen, & Pan, 2008; Tal-Or et al., 2009). After reviewing the systematizations, Sun’s (2013) systematization of the consequences of presumed media influences seems most promising to create a systematization of the consequences of all (social) media perceptions.

Sun’s (2013)¹³ systematization is based on two dimensions. The first dimension focuses on the *direction* of the reaction; the second dimension focuses on the *reasons* for the reaction. According to the first dimension, peoples’ reactions can converge with their (social) media perceptions or diverge from them. According to the second dimension, the reaction to (social) media perceptions can be driven by the presumed opinions of others or by the presumed behavior of others. In my opinion, a third group of reasons has to be added if the systematization shall apply to all (social) media perceptions. People can also react to their (social) media perceptions without considering what others may think or will do. Adding this group of reasons and crossing both dimensions, six groups of consequences can be derived: compliance, defiance, coordination, rectification, consonance and dissonance (see table 2).

Table 2: Systematization of the consequences of (social) media perceptions

		Reasons for reaction		
		<i>Presumed opinion of others</i>	<i>Presumed behavior of others</i>	<i>Independent response</i>
Direction of reaction	<i>Convergent</i>	Compliance	Coordination	Consonance
	<i>Divergent</i>	Defiance	Rectification	Dissonance

In the following, it will be explained what is meant by compliance reactions (chapter 2.3.1), defiance reactions (chapter 2.3.2), coordination reactions (chapter 2.3.3), rectification reactions (chapter 2.3.4), consonance reactions (chapter 2.3.5) and dissonance reactions (chapter 2.3.6). In doing so, an example is given at the beginning of each of the next chapters, which refers to how politicians might deal with social media. Furthermore, empirical results will be presented, which have investigated the different consequences. It has to be noted that it is an empirical question into which group the examined consequences are classified. For example, if different

¹³ Sun (2013) uses partly different terms in her systematization.

(social) media perceptions were tested synonymously and have different effects, it is possible that the direction of the reaction converges with one (social) media perceptions and diverges from another. Despite this shortcoming, the systematization helps to identify the possible consequences (social) media perceptions can have.

2.3.1 Compliance

Compliance reactions are based on normative considerations “where individuals bring their behaviors [or attitudes] closer to the perceived expectations of the referent group” (Sun, 2013, p. 377). For example, politicians might use social media more often to criticize other persons, if they assume that their voters expect this kind of communication.

On the one hand, individuals can *start with or reinforce* behaviors and attitudes that are in line with the perceived behaviors and attitudes of the referent group. For example, empirical studies show that adolescents have a stronger intention to smoke (Gunther et al., 2006; Paek, Gunther, McLeod, & Hove, 2011) or to become sexually active (Chia, 2006), the more they perceive that the social norms of their peers were influenced by smoke- or sex-related media content. This reaction is similar to the “me too” effect (Selnow, 1998). Some studies also show that individuals consider the perceived social norms of larger groups: Judges and prosecutors, for example, who follow the coverage about their cases intensively and are annoyed by them, consider more strongly the possible reactions of their public in their demands for a penalty and reasons for the judgment (Kepplinger & Zerback, 2009, 2012). This is in line with the reciprocal effects approach, according to which (political) decision makers develop assumptions about former and expected media reports and adapt their behavior accordingly (Kepplinger, 2007, 2017). Compliance responses were also detected in political contexts: Politicians from Switzerland, for example, use more social media tools, the stronger they perceive that their voters, colleagues, and their party want them to do so (Hoffmann et al., 2016). This is closely connected to the heuristic model of audience inclusion (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012). According to the model, media producers develop perceptions of the expectations of their audience and adapt their communication accordingly.

On the other hand, individuals can *give up or decrease* behaviors and positions that might be undesirable or unacceptable by the referent group. For example, inhabitants of peripheral development towns in Israel who believe that negative media content about their hometowns

influences their image among Israelis are considering moving to another town (Tsfati & Cohen, 2003). Moreover, Arabs who perceive that their image among the Jewish-Israeli majority was influenced by negative media reports about their community, feel politically and socially alienated from Israel (Tsfati, 2007). Studies that focus on the spiral of silence theory (e.g., Noelle-Neumann, 1974) are closely connected to these compliance behaviors. According to the theory, people monitor the public opinion via media and other sources, because of their fear of isolation. If they perceive that the public opinion changed against their own opinion, they avoid to express their opinion in public (e.g., Eilders & Porten-Che , 2016; Roessing, 2011). A recent meta-analysis indicated that the effect of the perceived public opinion on the willingness to speak out is small, but robust (Matthes, Knoll, & Sikorski, 2018).

2.3.2 Defiance

Defiance behaviors – reactions that counter the perceived norms – are less studied in communication science (Sun, 2013, p. 377). Defiance behavior occurs, for example, when politicians use social media rarely to criticize others, even if they assume that their voters expect this kind of communication from them.

Some studies have shown defiance behaviors in the context of *beauty*: Male college students in Singapore who perceive that their friends were influenced by media portrayals of ideal bodies are less likely to strengthen their own body image (Chia & Wen, 2010). Likewise, German women are less likely to consider plastic surgeries, the more they perceive that men were influenced by idealized female bodies (Dohle, 2011).

Another potential outcome is *physical resistance*: Studies from Israel show, for example, that the intention of Israeli settlers to violently resist a potential evacuation is influenced by their perception that other Israelis have a negative image of them due to negative media coverage (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005a). Their mistrust in mass media also indirectly influences their intention to resist violently (Tsfati & Cohen, 2005b).

Defiance reactions can also lead to *greater support for the deviant*. Wei et al. (2017) have shown that Chinese people who perceive that the Americans' opinion about China were influenced by negative news about China stronger support the public relations campaigns of the Chinese government.

In addition to the study from Dohle (2011), other *studies from Germany* show defiance reactions. For example, partisans more likely accept incivility and uncompromised rhetoric (Post, 2017) or justify overstatements in news articles (Post & Ramirez, 2018), the stronger they perceive that the media coverage is hostile and influential. Moreover, partisans of the PEGIDA-movement in Germany agree more strongly with radical forms of protest, the more dissatisfied they were with the reporting on the movement (Bernhard, 2018). A study by Post and Kepplinger (2019) has shown that even German journalists react with defiance. The more often they received hostile comments of their audience, the stronger they have tried, for example, “to stir up the hornets’ nest” (Post & Kepplinger, 2019, p. 2434).

2.3.3 Coordination

*Coordinative reactions*¹⁴ “refer to adaptive behaviors [or attitudes] based on calculations of how others’ possible behaviors may affect the changes to achieve their own goals” (Sun, 2013, p. 378). For example, politicians could use social media more often, if they assume that they influence others through their communication and, in turn, achieve better election results.

Such coordinative reactions have been studied in *economic contexts*. Results show, for example, that the stronger people assume that an article about a sugar shortage reaches other people and influences them to buy sugar, the more likely they also intend to buy sugar (Tal-Or, Cohen, Tsfati, & Gunther, 2010). A similar process may have led to an actual shortage of toilet paper in many countries during the coronavirus pandemic.

Even more often, coordinative behaviors have been studied in *political contexts*. For example, Cohen et al. (2008) have shown that the perceptions of politicians from Israel about the political media influence on the public increases their efforts to become featured in the media, which in turn leads to more media reports about them. Hoffmann et al. (2016) have shown that politicians from Switzerland who perceive that they benefit from the usage of social media have a stronger intention to use social media and in turn adopt more social media tools. However, these results could not be replicated in Germany so far: The social media communication of German

¹⁴ One could also argue that these reactions could be called co-orientation. However, the concept of co-orientation tries to explain communicative acts and focuses on (a) independent perceptions of two or more individuals about something and on (b) independent perceptions of these persons about each other (see Newcomb, 1953). Coordination, in contrast, refer to individuals’ perceptions of reference groups. Thus, the reciprocal relationship between different groups is not a necessary characteristic of coordination. Therefore, and in line with Sun (2008) and Tal-Or et al. (2009), the term coordination is used in the case at hand.

politicians at national (Bernhard et al., 2016; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a; Metag & Marcinkowski, 2012) or state level (Marcinkowski & Metag, 2014; Metag & Marcinkowski, 2012) is largely independent of their perceptions of the media influence. However, local politicians in Germany increase their social media communication, the stronger they perceive that journalists (but not the public or other politicians) can be influenced by social media (Bernhard & Dohle, 2015b). In most cases, the presumed reach of social media also did not influence politicians' communication intensity (Bernhard et al., 2016; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a). Instead, several studies from Germany have shown that politicians communicate more often via social media, the stronger they perceive that social media is suitable to get political information (Bernhard et al., 2016; Bernhard & Dohle, 2015b; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a). Moreover, politicians' perceptions that the mass media coverage is hostile against them influence (indirectly) their actual social media usage (Marcinkowski & Metag, 2014) and their motivation to gain public attention through conflict and drama (Matthes et al., 2019).

Some studies among *citizens* also detect coordinative responses. Citizens communicate more often on Facebook and Twitter, the stronger they perceive that their friends use and were influenced by these tools (Bernhard & Dohle, 2018). Moreover, during election campaigns, voters intensified their communication efforts (Bernhard & Dohle, 2015a) and were more likely to vote strategically¹⁵ (Cohen & Tsifti, 2009), if they perceive that (online) media had a strong influence on others.

2.3.4 Rectification

If people assume that others cannot cope with specific (social) media content and will react in an undesirable manner, people can try to prevent others from this content or minimize the estimated negative effects. Sun, Shen, and Pan (2008) call those reactions “*rectification behaviors*” (see also, Sun, 2013). For example, politicians who perceive that many people are negatively influenced by social media content may be more willing to censor social media or

¹⁵ In line with Tal-Or et al. (2009) and Sun (2013), strategic voting is classified here as a coordination reaction, according to the following consideration: People want the best possible electoral outcome and therefore may vote not for their preferred party. However, one could also argue that strategic voting is a rectification reaction, if people want to prevent the country from a specific government coalition. Thus, it is an empirical question if strategic voting is a coordination reaction or a rectification reaction.

communicate more often to correct the negative impact. Basically, these two reactions can be distinguished: preventive and corrective actions.

Although *preventive actions* also can manifest themselves in the support for a stronger (social) media literacy education (e.g., Dohle & Bernhard, 2013; Jang & Kim, 2018), they refer mostly “to behavioral outcomes seeking to put a stop to content perceived to be damaging for certain social groups or society as a whole, and typically manifest as a willingness to censor media content” (Rojas, 2010, p. 346). More specifically, the support of censorship measures is the most often studied preventive reaction to (social) media perceptions (Xu & Gonzenbach, 2008), which is why it is also called the “gold standard for testing these effects” (Cohen & Weimann, 2008, p. 386). Relationships between presumed influences and the support for censorship measures were found in several non-political and political contexts, although a meta-analysis indicated that the relationship is rather weak (Feng & Guo, 2012): For example, people support censorship of pornography (Gunther, 1995; B. Lee & Tamborini, 2005; Lo & Paddon, 2000; Rojas, Shah, & Faber, 1996; Tal-Or et al., 2010), rap music (McLeod, Eveland, & Nathanson, 1997), reality shows (Cohen & Weimann, 2008), TV violence (Rojas et al., 1996; Salwen & Dupagne, 1999) or advertising (Lim, 2017; Lim, Chock, & Golan, 2020; Shah, Faber, & Youn, 1999) more strongly, the stronger they assume that others were (more) influenced (than themselves) by this content. In political contexts, this relationship was detected, for example, in news about election polls (H. Kim, 2015; Price & Stroud, 2006; Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011; Wei, Lo, & Lu, 2011), “unfair” campaign news or messages (Hoffner & Rehkoff, 2011; Salwen, 1998), negative political advertising (Salwen & Dupagne, 1999; Wei & Lo, 2007), terror propaganda (Golan & Lim, 2016), but not in the regulation of fake news (Jang & Kim, 2018). Some studies from Germany show that even journalists (Bernhard & Dohle, 2014, 2016) or politicians (Dohle & Bernhard, 2014b; Dohle, Blank, & Vowe, 2012) support media restrictions when they presume that (online) media have a strong political influence on the public. In contrast, the perceived suitability of online media for political information decreases their support of censorship measures (Bernhard & Dohle, 2016; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014b). Other (social) media perceptions, for example, the presumed reach (e.g., Dohle & Bernhard, 2013) or its perceived hostility (e.g., Wei, Chia, & Lo, 2011) also lead to more support for restrictions.

Instead of trying to protect others from potentially harmful media content through censorship measurements, individuals can also *try to correct or reduce the presumed harmful media effect* on the public opinion. Studies show that people who perceive strong (social) media influences

try to convince others, for example, by political discursive activities (Barnidge & Rojas, 2014; Hart, Feldman, Leiserowitz, & Maibach, 2015; Hwang, Pan, & Sun, 2008; H. Kim, 2015), writing journalistic opinion pieces (Bernhard & Dohle, 2016), social media activities (M. Chung, Munno, & Moritz, 2015; Golan & Lim, 2016; Lim & Golan, 2011) or political participation in protests and campaigns (Barnidge, Sayre, & Rojas, 2015; Feldman, Hart, Leiserowitz, Maibach, & Roser-Renouf, 2017; Rojas, 2010; Rojas et al., 2016). They may also try to minimize the estimated negative political outcome, for example, by participating in elections (Golan, Banning, & Lundy, 2008; Lin, 2014; Rojas et al., 2016; for contradictory results, see, Banning, 2006). These “*corrective actions*” (Rojas, 2010) can be found all over the globe, as a recent comparative study in 17 countries shows (Barnidge, Rojas, Beck, & Schmitt-Beck, 2020). In the mentioned studies, corrective actions were mostly influenced by perceptions of biased media and often by perceptions of influential media. Moreover, some studies show that corrective actions were influenced by other (social) media perceptions, for example, by the perceived incivility of online comments (T. K. Naab, Naab, & Brandmeier, 2019) or the perception that the media generally is hostile (Schindler, Fortkord, Posthumus, Obermaier, & Reinemann, 2018).

2.3.5 Consonance

People do not always have to consider the norms or potential behaviors of others when they react to (social) media perceptions. If their reactions are in line with their perceptions and the presumed behaviors and the presumed opinions of others are irrelevant for them, one can speak of *consonance reactions*. Such a consonance reaction occurs, for example, if politicians perceive that specific (social) media communicators are trustworthy or specific (social) media services are suitable to get information and they therefore use these (social) media services to obtain information.

Primarily, these consonance reactions could be detected in the decisions to use or to not use specific media: For example, Tsfaty and Cappella (2003) have shown that people who perceive that traditional mass media is not trustworthy and credible less often use mass media and more often use non-mainstream media. For this decision, it is not necessarily relevant what other people may think or will do. Likewise, Williams (2012) has shown that people who trust news reporters pay more attention to newspaper news. Hostile media perceptions can also lead to

consonance reactions: People who perceive the coverage of a particular media service as biased against their views are more likely to use another media service (K. S. Kim, 2011; Morris, 2007). Moreover, Bernhard et al. (2014) have shown that German citizens who perceive that a specific (social) media service is suitable to obtain political information tend to use this service more often.

2.3.6 Dissonance

Dissonance reactions refer to behaviors that diverge from peoples' (social) media perceptions and occur regardless of presumed opinions or presumed behavior of others. For example, politicians react dissonantly when they use a specific social media service to get political information, even though they do not trust the communicators of this service or consider this service as unsuitable for obtaining political information.

Although dissonance reactions are theoretically possible, they are rarely found empirically. Tsfati and Cappella (2005) have shown, for example, that many people use specific media services even if they do not trust them. However, the authors conclude that these people have other motivations to use these media services and that these motives overshadow their low media trust.

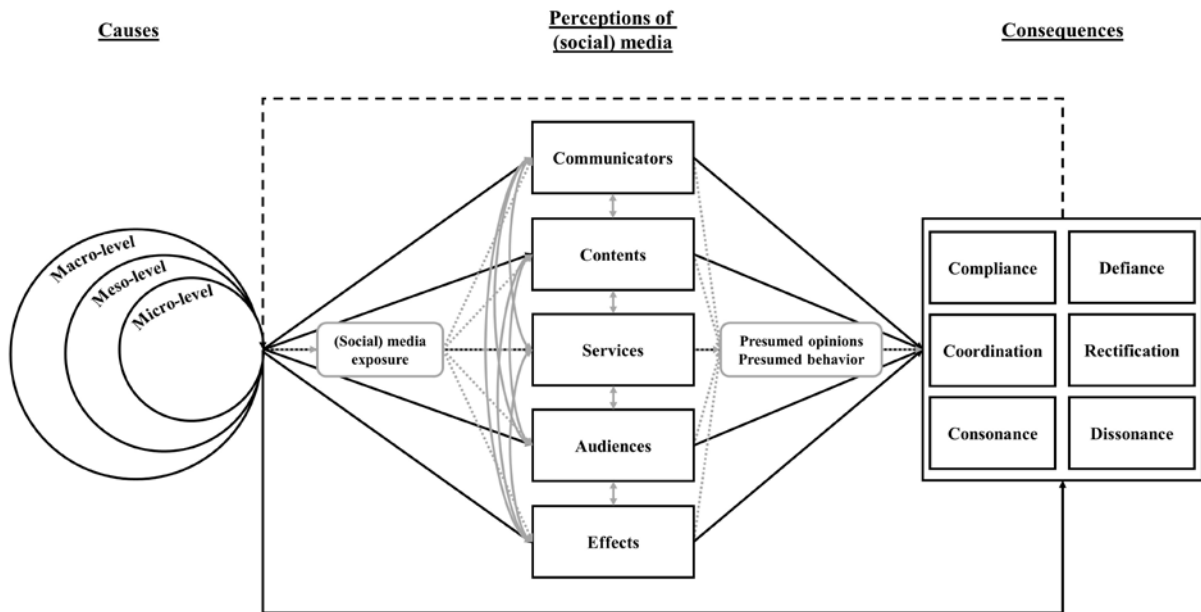
2.4 Research model

After reviewing theoretical approaches and the state of research of (social) media perceptions (chapter 2.1) as well as their potential causes (chapter 2.2) and consequences (chapter 2.3), a *model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions* is proposed (figure 1). The development of such a model could add to theoretical foundations of future studies. Parts of this theoretical model will be tested empirically in this research project.

The central part of the model is the *systematization of perceptions of (social) media* (chapter 2.1). As discussed above, perceptions of (social) media communicators (e.g., trust), contents (e.g., hostile media perception), services (e.g., perceived suitability), audiences (e.g., perceived reach) and effects (e.g., third-person perception) are relevant. Several theoretical approaches (e.g., Gunther, 1998) and empirical studies indicate that these perceptions are related to each other. Although there are some ideas about how different perceptions are causally connected

(e.g., that the presumed reach of (social) media influences the presumed influence of (social) media), the theoretical and empirical foundations is too weak to put the perceptions in a specific order. Therefore, the relationships between the perceptions are not causally arranged in the model.

Figure 1: Model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions



The *potential causes* of (social) media perceptions are classified into macro-level factors (e.g., media system), meso-level factors (e.g., organizational background) and micro-level factors (e.g., psychological motives; chapter 2.2). The causes of (social) media perceptions are presented in an onion model to indicate that macro-level factors are hierarchically above meso-level factors and meso-level factors are above micro-level factors. On the one hand, these factors can directly influence how people perceive (social) media. On the other hand, specific perceptions can also emerge through the exposure to certain (social) media content. In this case, perceptions develop through the interplay of (social) media exposure and macro-, meso- and micro-factors, which is why (social) media exposure is arranged between causes and perceptions in the model.

For the *potential consequences* of (social) media perceptions, established systematizations of the consequences of specific (social) media perceptions were reviewed (chapter 2.3). Building up on Sun's (2013) systematization of the consequences of presumed media influences, an own systematization of the consequences of several (social) media perceptions was proposed. According to this systematization, the consequences of (social) media perceptions can be

arranged in two dimensions. The first dimension focuses on the direction of the reaction: People can react convergent or divergent to their perceptions. The second dimension focuses on the reasons for the reaction: The reaction to (social) media perceptions can be driven by presumptions of the opinions of others, by presumptions of the behavior of others or independently of both presumptions. Therefore, the presumed opinions and presumed behaviors are also presented as relevant mediators in the model. If these dimensions are crossed, six groups of consequences arise: compliance, coordination, consonance, defiance, rectification and dissonance reactions.

The model contains also a direct *connection from the potential causes to the potential consequences* of (social) media perceptions. This direct connection indicates that several factors on micro-, meso- and macro-level can have a direct influence on the mentioned reactions. For example, several studies show that younger politicians use social media services more often than older ones, even if social media perceptions are controlled (e.g., Bernhard et al., 2016). Therefore, these potential direct relationships should be controlled in empirical analyses. In doing so, the proportion of the impact of (social) media perceptions on specific reactions can be compared with the direct impact of micro-, meso- and macro-level factors on the reactions.

Moreover, the model contains a line from consequences to causes, as it is possible that *potential consequences influence micro-, meso- and macro-level factors*. For example, if politicians decide to censor social media services because they think that these services have a strong and negative influence on others, this can have direct effects on the micro-level (e.g., the individual motives to use social media), meso-level (e.g., the structure of an organization) and macro-level (e.g., the new media environment).

The proposed relationships in the model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions lead the research program of this project (chapter 3). However, not all relationships can be tested, because of the model's complexity. Nevertheless, the research model can guide further studies on the causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions.

3 Research program

3.1 Organizational framework

The research program was carried out as part of a subproject of the research unit “*Political Communication in the Online World*”. The research group was funded by the German Research Foundation (grant number 1381). From 2011 to 2018, seven subprojects and one coordination project dealt with the question of how the online world is changing political communication.

This research project is based on the subproject titled “*Effects of Assumptions about Effects and Use. Causes and Consequences of the Perception of Political Influence and Political Use of Online Media*”. It focused mainly on the consequences of political actors’ and citizens’ (social) media perceptions, but also on their causes. The subproject was led by Gerhard Vowe and Marco Dohle and was based at Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf. Uli Bernhard was a research associate from 2011 to 2015. In October 2015, Uli Bernhard was appointed Professor at the University of Applied Sciences Hannover. I adopted the vacant position from 2015 to 2018. Moreover, Björn Klein was a research associate of the subproject from 2015 to 2016.

3.2 Data collection and samples

In order to analyze the causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions of political actors and citizens, *quantitative surveys* were conducted. Eleven of these surveys are the empirical basis of this research project (see table 3).

A research project of this size is hardly feasible without *teamwork*. Gerhard Vowe, Marco Dohle and Uli Bernhard have conceptualized the surveys conducted between 2012 and 2015, I was deeply involved in the theoretical and methodological conceptualization as well as the realization of all surveys conducted in 2016.

Five surveys were conducted among *citizens*. German citizens were surveyed four times, Greek citizens once. Precisely, German citizens were surveyed in 2012 and 2013 with a two-wave telephone panel survey and with an online survey in 2016. Moreover, in 2016, German and Greek citizens were asked about their perceptions of the news coverage on the European financial crisis in a comparative online survey. In all online surveys, quotas regarding sex, age and education were imposed to get an approximately representative picture of the German or

Greek population. The participants of the two-wave telephone panel survey were selected via random sampling.

Table 3: Overview of the specific surveys

Who?	When?	Political context?	How?	How many?
<i>Citizens</i>				
German citizens	2012	Politics in general	Telephone (panel)	$n = 717$
	2013			$n = 452$
German citizens	2016	Politics in general	Online	$n = 969$
German citizens	2016	EU financial crisis	Online	$n = 492$
Greek citizens	2016	EU financial crisis	Online	$n = 484$
<i>Political actors</i>				
German national parliamentarians	2012	Politics in general	Paper-and-pencil or online	$n = 194$
	2013			$n = 149$
	2015			$n = 170$
	2016			$n = 118$
German city councilors	2016	Politics in general	Online	$n = 859$
German political communication practitioners	2015	Politics in general	Online	$n = 1,067$

Six surveys were conducted among *political actors* – more specifically among German national parliamentarians, German city councilors and German political communication practitioners. All German national parliamentarians were asked to participate in a survey four times between 2012 and 2016. They had the opportunity to fill out the questionnaire online or with pen and paper (“dual-mode-design”; Masch & Rosar, 2020, p. 5). Moreover, in 2016, the German city councilors of 54 out of 63 of Germany’s largest cities were invited to participate in an online survey. German political communication practitioners – professionals whose aim is to influence the public opinion about collectively binding decisions – were asked to take part in an online survey in 2015. In order to get responses of political communication practitioners, all people from the database of the specialist professional communication publisher Helios Media GmbH (in the meantime renamed to Quadriga Media Berlin GmbH) who likely are political communication practitioners were asked to participate in the survey. As incentive for participation of the political communication practitioners, one euro was donated to a charity organization for each completed questionnaire.

3.3 Measurements

In the surveys, perceptions regarding the (social) media *content* (hostile media perception), (social) media *services* (perceived suitability), (social) media *audiences* (perceived reach, perceived audience expectations) and (social) media *effects* (presumed influence) were considered. Thus, four of the five mentioned perceptions of the model of the causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions were considered in the surveys. Only perceptions regarding (social) media communicators (e.g., trust) could not be considered.

In all eleven surveys, the respondents were asked about their perceptions of how strongly certain groups were politically influenced by (social) media services (*presumed influence*: e.g., “In your opinion, how strong is the political influence of [...] on [...]?”) as well as how many people within these groups use the (social) media services for specific purposes (*presumed reach*: e.g., “How many [...] use [...] to [...] at least sometimes?”). In many studies, the *perceived suitability* of these (social) media services for specific purposes was also measured (e.g., “How suitable do you consider [...] to be for [...]?”). In the comparative survey among German and Greek citizens in 2016, the *perceived hostility* of news media was also measured. In contrast to the other surveys, the German and Greek citizens were asked in this survey about their perceptions regarding (social) media coverage in the respectively other country (e.g., in the German survey, “What do you think: How did the Greek media evaluate German politics as a whole?”). Moreover, German Bundestag members and German city councilors were asked about their *perceived audience expectations* in 2016. Specifically, they were asked about how strongly they perceive that Facebook and Twitter users expect politicians to communicate in a certain way (e.g., “How much do you perceive that [...] users expect politicians on [...] to do [...]”). Referring to this, German citizens were asked in 2016 what kind of communication they expect from politicians on Facebook and Twitter (e.g., “How strongly do you expect politicians to do [...] on [...]?”).

As *potential causes* of (social) media perceptions, factors at micro-, meso- and macro-level were considered in the surveys. For example, at micro-level, several sociodemographic factors, attitudes and opinions were surveyed. At meso-level, the size and type of organizations were considered in the studies among political actors. Moreover, comparisons between different groups of political actors (e.g., political communication practitioners and politicians) as well as between political actors and citizens are located at meso-level. At macro-level, the country varied in the comparative study about the European financial crisis as well as the political level

in the comparative study between local and national politicians. Furthermore, in the longitudinal study among members of the Bundestag and the panel survey among German citizens, changes over time could be observed.

The communication activities of political actors on social media were surveyed in order to identify *potential consequences* of social media perceptions – especially, to identify compliance reactions (chapter 2.3.1) and coordination reactions (chapter 2.3.3). Whether compliance or coordination reactions are present is an empirical question that depends on whether the presumed opinions of others or the presumed behavior of others are decisive explanatory factors. Moreover, in order to identify rectification reactions, citizens were asked how strongly they demand restrictions of online media and its influences. In the comparative study between Germans and Greeks, perceptions of hostility were focused on. These perceptions can be interpreted as presumed opinions of others – a relevant mediator in the model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions.

4 Overview of the specific publications

Besides the present overview of the research program, the eleven empirical surveys resulted in *six publications*. All publications are already published in journals with a peer review process. I was single author, first author and co-author in two studies each. The organizational framework (chapter 3.1) explains why Marco Dohle and Uli Bernhard are co-authors of four publications and Björn Klein is co-author of one publication:

- Dohle, M., Bernhard, U. & Kelm, O. (2017). Presumed media influences and demands for restrictions: Using panel data to examine the causal direction. *Mass Communication and Society*, 20(5), 595–613. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15205436.2017.1303072>
- Dohle, M., Kelm, O., Bernhard, U. & Klein, B. (2020). Interplay between media-related perceptions and perceptions of hostility in international conflicts: Results from a study of German and Greek citizens. *International Communication Gazette*. Advanced online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1748048520970062>
- Kelm, O. (2019). Angebot und Nachfrage politischer Kommunikation in Sozialen Netzwerkdiensten. *merz | medien + erziehung*, 63(6), 40–52.

- Kelm, O. (2020). Why do politicians use Facebook and Twitter the way they do? The influence of perceived expectations. *Studies in Communication and Media*, 9(1), 8–34. <https://doi.org/10.5771/2192-4007-2020-1-8>
- Kelm, O., Dohle, M. & Bernhard, U. (2017). Social media activities of political communication practitioners: The impact of strategic orientation and in-group orientation. *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, 11(4), 306–323. <https://doi.org/10.1080/1553118X.2017.1323756>
- Kelm, O., Dohle, M. & Bernhard, U. (2019). Politicians' self-reported social media activities and perceptions: Results from four surveys among German parliamentarians. *Social Media + Society*, 5(2), 1–12. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305119837679>

In the following, the *main results of the individual studies* will briefly be presented separately, before the results of these studies will be connected to each other in chapter 5.

The study “*Presumed media influences and demands for restrictions: Using panel data to examine the causal direction*” (Dohle, Bernhard, & Kelm, 2017) investigates the causal relationship between online media perceptions and demands for restricting the political influence of the Internet. This study is particularly of relevance, because many studies that focus on perceptions and their consequences are based on cross-sectional data. Thus, it is largely unclear whether media perceptions influence, for example, rectification reactions or whether these rectification reactions influence media perceptions. To answer this question, a two-wave panel telephone survey among German citizens in 2012 ($n = 771$) and 2013 ($n = 452$) was conducted. In both surveys, citizens were asked to evaluate the political influence of online media on the German population, to estimate how many people in Germany use online media to get political information and to what extent they think that the political influence of the Internet should be restricted. Descriptive aggregated results show that the perceptions and opinions of German citizens hardly changed between 2012 and 2013: They evaluated the political influence and reach of online media as moderate and did not have strong opinions for or against restrictions of the Internet. However, on individual level, the results of the path model (cross-lagged panel design) indicate that the perceived political influence of online media rather affects demands for restrictions than the other way around. Thus, perceptions regarding online media effects are indeed the cause of rectification reactions. Moreover, the results show that the perceived political influence rather affects the perceived reach of online media than the other way around.

The study “*Social media activities of political communication practitioners: The impact of strategic orientation and in-group orientation*” (Kelm, Dohle, & Bernhard, 2017) focuses on political communication practitioners (e.g., press spokespersons of political organizations). These political communication practitioners are important players in the political decision-making process that are rarely studied in political communication research. Moreover, it is far from clear which perceptions of which groups are relevant for political actors’ social media communication (see, chapter 2.3.3). Therefore, the study asks whether the practitioners’ perceptions of the influence of Facebook and Twitter on specific target groups and the reach of Facebook and Twitter among these target groups are related to their own Facebook and Twitter communication (*coordination reaction*). The results of a survey among political communication practitioners conducted in 2015 ($n = 1,067$) indicate that practitioners with different organizational backgrounds (e.g., practitioners working for companies or for state institutions) use and perceive Facebook and Twitter more or less similarly. They use Facebook more often than Twitter for professional purposes, namely, to gather political information, to call other people’s attention to important political issues and to cultivate work-related contacts. Moreover, they assume that Facebook and Twitter have a stronger influence on politicians, journalists, the general public and other communication practitioners than on themselves (third-person perception; Davison, 1983). Regression analyses show that political communication practitioners, regardless of their organizational background, intensify their Facebook and Twitter communication, the stronger they perceive that other political communication practitioners use and are influenced by Facebook and Twitter, as well as the more they perceive that Facebook and Twitter are suitable tools for political communication activities. Perceptions regarding the influence and reach among politicians, journalists, and the general public had no influence on their social media communication. Thus, the results indicate firstly that perceptions regarding social media services (perceived suitability), audiences (presumed reach) and effects (presumed influence) are relevant explanatory factors for coordination reactions. Secondly, the results indicate that only perceptions towards the in-group are relevant for political communication practitioners’ social media communication. The results indicate a strong in-group orientation among political communication practitioners and a less strategic orientation toward external stakeholders. This could be interpreted as a *me too-effect* (Selnow, 1998), a form of *impression management* towards colleagues (Leary, 1993) or an indicator for an increasing *professionalization* of the field of strategic communication (e.g., Strömbäck & Esser, 2014).

The study “*Politicians’ self-reported social media activities and perceptions: Results from four surveys among German parliamentarians*” (Kelm, Dohle, & Bernhard, 2019) asks to what extent the social media perceptions and activities of German Bundestag members have changed over time and to what extent perceptions and activities are related to one another. According to the *mediatization of politics thesis* (Strömbäck & Esser, 2014), the social media activities of parliamentarians and their perceptions of the influence of social media should have increased over time. Moreover, according to the *influence of presumed influence approach* (Gunther & Storey, 2003), perceptions regarding media effects should influence communication activities (*coordination reaction*). The results of four surveys among German Bundestag members in 2012 ($n = 194$), 2013 ($n = 149$), 2015 ($n = 170$) and 2016 ($n = 118$) indicate that parliamentarians’ Facebook and Twitter activities to get political information and to broadcast information about political work or about their everyday life hardly changed between 2012 and 2016. The same applies to the parliamentarians’ evaluation of the political influence of Facebook and Twitter on the general public, journalists, other politicians and their own voters. Although medialization of politics is not a linear process, the constant perceptions and activities are remarkable. The results of regression analyses show that, similar to Kelm et al. (2017), the perceived suitability of social media platforms has a positive influence on their social media communication. However, the parliamentarians’ presumed political influence of Facebook and Twitter on specific target groups as well as their presumed reach of Facebook and Twitter among these target groups are largely independent from their social media activities. Like political communication practitioners, parliamentarians seem to communicate not very strategically. However, in contrast to political communication practitioners, parliamentarians did not consider their in-group in their communication behavior. Reasons could be that politicians use social media for *intrinsic motives* (e.g., Hoffmann et al., 2016), that they use social media only strategically during *election campaigns* or that politicians use social media rather as a playground, because they still try to understand the affordances of the *network media logic* (Klinger & Svensson, 2015).

Since politicians’ perceptions of the reach and influence of social media seem to have only limited influence on their social media activities, another explanatory factor was tested in the study “*Why do politicians use Facebook and Twitter the way they do? The influence of perceived audience expectations*” (Kelm, 2020): perceived audience expectations. Therefore, the heuristic model of audience inclusion in journalism (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012) was transferred to the political system. It was argued that citizens have specific expectations for

politicians' social media communication and that politicians want to satisfy these expectations. Moreover, politicians from different parties may have different perceived audience expectations, because they have different audiences. To test these assumptions, data from the survey among German Bundestag members in 2016 ($n = 118$) and from the survey among German city councilors in 2016 was used ($n = 859$). The results clearly indicate that the Facebook and Twitter communication of German politicians is strongly orientated to their perceptions of their audiences' expectations (*compliance reaction*). For example, if politicians perceive that their Facebook audience expects information about their everyday life, politicians broadcast more often information about their everyday life on Facebook. In line with the *equalization thesis* (Margolis et al., 1999), politicians from minor parties communicate more often interactively (e.g., discuss with others) than politicians from major parties. In addition, the party size influences to some extent politicians' perceptions: Politicians from minor parties perceive more strongly than politicians from major parties that their Facebook audiences expect them to criticize other politicians and journalists. The results show that perceived audience expectations are a better indicator to explain politicians' social media communication than the presumed influence of social media. The results also raise normative questions, especially, how politicians will communicate if their audiences expect a more private, negative or populist communication.

Although politicians' perceptions of their audience expectations influence their Facebook and Twitter communication (Kelm, 2020), it was unclear to what extent politicians' perceptions of audience expectations and their communication activities meet the actual expectations of their audience on Facebook and Twitter. Therefore, the study "*Angebot und Nachfrage politischer Kommunikation in Sozialen Netzwerkdiensten*" (Kelm, 2019) compared the data gained among German Bundestag members ($n = 118$) and German city councilors ($n = 859$) with data gained from a survey among German citizens in 2016 ($n = 969$). Results showed that citizens' expectations and politicians' perceptions of audience expectations largely meet each other: The expectations of citizens that politicians should communicate on Facebook and Twitter in a specific way (e.g., broadcast private information) differ only slightly from the perceived audience expectations of the politicians. Moreover, while the self-reported communication activities of city councilors differ somewhat from the citizens' expectations, the Bundestag members' self-reported communication activities largely meet the citizens' expectations. Despite these correspondences between politicians' social media activities and citizens' expectations, the results also show that only few Facebook and Twitter users follow politicians,

read their posts and try to communicate with them. A reason could be that only few citizens are interested in politics at all. On the one hand, a pessimistic interpretation is that politicians could communicate whatever they want – they will not reach and influence citizens who are not interested in politics. On the other hand, an optimistic interpretation of the results is that politicians know what kind of communication Facebook and Twitter users want and that they try to give them this kind of communication – regardless, if they reach and influence many or few citizens.

Only few studies have analyzed media perceptions and their consequences across borders (e.g., Wei et al., 2017), i.e., to what extent people develop perceptions of foreign (social) media and what consequences these perceptions have. In order to narrow the research gap, the study “*Interplay between media-related perceptions and perceptions of hostility in international conflicts: Results from a study among German and Greek citizens*” (Dohle, Kelm, Bernhard, & Klein, 2020) has examined in a comparative study of German and Greek citizens how these groups perceive the reporting from another country and what effects these perceptions have. Specifically, on the one hand, German citizens ($n = 492$) were asked how influential and hostile they evaluate the coverage of Greek news media on the European financial crisis. On the other hand, Greek citizens ($n = 484$) were asked how influential and hostile they evaluate the coverage of German media on the same topic. Furthermore, Greeks and Germans were asked to estimate how many people in the respective other country use journalistic media and social media for obtaining information about the crisis. The results show that Greek citizens evaluate the German coverage on the European financial crisis as more influential and hostile than German citizens evaluate the Greek coverage. In addition, Greeks estimated that Germans frequently inform themselves about the crisis via journalistic and social media, while Germans estimated that Greeks inform themselves less frequently. Moreover, the perceptions that foreign media coverage is hostile and influential positively influences perceptions of hostility. These perceptions can be interpreted as presumed opinions of others. For example, the stronger Germans perceive that Greek media coverage is hostile against Germany and influences the opinions of Greeks, the stronger they perceive that Germany is not respected in Greece. On the contrary, the perception of how many inhabitants of the other country are exposed to these media reports did not have an effect. Moreover, mediation models show that the hostile media perception influences presumed influences, which, in turn, influences perceptions of hostility. The findings suggest that media perceptions could have conflict-intensifying effects in international relations.

5 Implications and connections of the individual publications

So far, the publications of this research project have only been presented individually (chapter 4). In this chapter, the results of the empirical studies will be connected. Moreover, the implications of these results will be made clear, which are, for example, specific suggestions for follow-up research. Therefore, in a first step the question how and why (social) media perceptions differ will be answered (chapter 5.1). In a second step, it will be answered what consequences (social) media perceptions have (chapter 5.2). Finally, the results of the individual studies will be integrated in the model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions (chapter 5.3).

5.1 How and why do (social) media perceptions differ?

The individual studies show how (social) media perceptions differ (a) over time, (b) across borders, (c) between different organizations, (d) at different political levels and (e) between different groups. In the studies dealing with social media perceptions, it is also possible to differentiate between perceptions of Facebook and Twitter as well as between perceptions regarding different reference groups.

(a) The results show that (social) media perceptions are rather constant *over time*: Only small differences can be observed in the presumed influence of Facebook and Twitter by members of the Bundestag between 2012 and 2016 (Kelm et al., 2019) as well as in the presumed influence and presumed reach of online media by German citizens between 2012 and 2013 (Dohle et al., 2017). These are important findings, because the *mediatization of politics* thesis assumes that the presumed influence of media is growing over time (e.g., Strömbäck, 2008). The results indicate, on the contrary, that these perceptions hardly change on aggregate level in about half a decade. Mediatization processes seem to be taking place more slowly than assumed. Another explanation could be that citizens and political actors evaluate the political influence of social media services only as strong during election campaigns. Both explanations underline the need for further research of similar studies during election times and with a longer time lag.

(b) The results of Dohle et al. (2020) indicate that people develop *perceptions of the coverage of foreign media*, even if it is unlikely that they actually watch, read or hear the coverage. These perceptions are likely based on individuals' home country's media coverage of the foreign

country's media coverage. In the case of the European financial crisis, German media reported, for example, on the Greek media coverage when Greek media outlets illustrated Angela Merkel as a Nazi. To measure what images domestic media draw about foreign media, content analyses are needed that analyze how often and in which way news media report on the coverage of a foreign country. Moreover, the results show that people from different countries develop different perceptions of how hostile and influential the coverage of foreign media is and how many people in the respective other country are exposed to media content. Besides the explanation that the media coverage of one country is indeed more hostile and influential, an alternative explanation could be that macro-economic factors are relevant. People in Greece suffered more strongly from the European financial crisis, which is why they might have developed a low in-group status that could increase hostile media perceptions (e.g., Hartmann & Tanis, 2013). More comparative survey research is needed, especially in international conflicts, to determine the potential conflict-intensifying effects of (social) media perceptions.

(c) The results of two studies show that the *organizational background* of political actors can, but not necessarily has to influence social media perceptions (Kelm, 2020; Kelm et al., 2017). On the one hand, the presumed influence, reach and suitability of social media do not differ noteworthyly between political communication practitioners who work for different types of organizations (e.g., companies, state institutions or associations). On the other hand, the size of political parties partly influences the politicians' perceptions of what kind of communication their audiences expect. Thus, political actors from different organizations largely agree on how influential, reachable and suitable social media services are. But they disagree about what kind of communication their audience might expect. Since political actors from different organizations have different audiences, this result seems obvious. However, it is a noteworthy contribution for political communication research, as it highlights the importance of the meso-level as cause for different perceptions, which should be considered systematically in further studies.

(d) The results of two studies show that the *political level* on which politicians work slightly influences how politicians perceive social media (Kelm, 2019, 2020). While Bundestag members evaluate Twitter as more influential, reachable and suitable than city councilors, city councilors tend to evaluate Facebook as more influential, reachable and suitable than Bundestag members (see also, table 4, table 5 and table 6).

5 Implications and connections of the individual publications

Table 4: Presumed influence of Facebook and Twitter on politicians, journalists and the general public estimated by political communication practitioners, Bundestag members, city councilors and citizens

	Presumed influence on politicians			Presumed influence on journalists			Presumed influence on general public			
	Estimation by			Estimation by			Estimation by			
	Political communication practitioners	Bundestag members	City councilors	Political communication practitioners	Bundestag members	City councilors	Political communication practitioners	Bundestag members	City councilors	Citizens
<i>Facebook</i>	2.96 (.93)	2.76 (.99)	2.99 (1.01)	3.06 (.94)	2.86 (1.05)	3.05 (1.01)	3.15 (1.04)	2.72 (.86)	2.60 (.89)	3.05 (1.08)
<i>Twitter</i>	3.35 (1.01)	2.86 (1.07)	2.41 (.97)	3.56 (1.01)	3.22 (1.21)	2.66 (1.08)	2.34 (.88)	2.25 (.92)	2.06 (.86)	2.72 (1.10)
<i>n</i>	1108-1120	93-117	747-834	1106-1116	93-117	749-834	1110-1116	93-117	748-831	956-964

Notes: Mean and standard deviation (in parentheses); data from 2016 (Bundestag members, city councilors and citizens) and 2015 (political communication practitioners); not all mean values and standard deviations were presented in the individual publications; from 1 = *no influence* to 5 = *very strong influence*.

Table 5: Presumed reach of Facebook and Twitter among politicians, journalists and the general public to get political information estimated by political communication practitioners, Bundestag members, city councilors and citizens

	Presumed reach among politicians			Presumed reach among journalists			Presumed reach among general public			
	Estimation by			Estimation by			Estimation by			
	Political communication practitioners	Bundestag members	City councilors	Political communication practitioners	Bundestag members	City councilors	Political communication practitioners	Bundestag members	City councilors	Citizens
<i>Facebook</i>	3.17 (1.11)	3.79 (1.02)	3.59 (.94)	3.54 (1.12)	3.94 (.97)	4.01 (1.01)	2.72 (.98)	3.18 (.76)	2.92 (.89)	2.85 (1.15)
<i>Twitter</i>	3.27 (1.00)	3.29 (1.02)	2.50 (1.05)	3.98 (.91)	4.04 (1.04)	3.41 (1.23)	2.33 (.81)	2.33 (.77)	2.06 (.84)	2.35 (1.09)
<i>n</i>	1121-1124	116	816-835	1116-1118	116	824-841	1109	117	809-830	959-961

Notes: Mean and standard deviation (in parentheses); data from 2016 (Bundestag members, city councilors and citizens) and 2015 (political communication practitioners). Not all mean values and standard deviations were presented in the individual publications; from 1 = *almost no one* to 5 = *almost all*.

Table 6: Perceived suitability of Facebook and Twitter to get political information estimated by political communication practitioners, Bundestag members, city councilors and citizens

Perceived suitability to get political information				
	Estimation by			
	Political communication practitioners	Bundestag members	City councilors	Citizens
	<i>Facebook</i>	2.26 (1.08)	3.00 (.97)	3.00 (1.14)
<i>Twitter</i>	2.95 (1.25)	3.04 (1.24)	2.12 (1.02)	2.22 (1.12)
<i>n</i>	1117-1122	116-117	810-842	960-965

Notes: Mean and standard deviation (in parentheses); data from 2016 (Bundestag members, city councilors and citizens) and 2015 (political communication practitioners). Not all mean values and standard deviations were presented in the individual publications; from 1 = *not suitable* to 5 = *very suitable*.

One reason could be that Twitter is more often used by Bundestag members than by city councilors. That underlines the assumption that Twitter is a social media service used primarily by elite groups, while Facebook is a social media service used by all groups in the population (e.g., Bernhard et al., 2016, p. 79; Mellon & Prosser, 2017). The perceived audience expectations differ only slightly between Bundestag members and city councilors. Both groups perceive that their audiences primarily want to receive political information and, secondly, to discuss politicians with other people. Moreover, they perceive that their audiences do not expect further, more interactive communication activities or private information. These results are important, especially in combination with the results of the survey among citizens, because they show that politicians on local and national level have a good understanding of what kind of communication their audiences want. This refutes, at least in part, accusations that politicians have distanced themselves too far from citizens.

(e) Besides differences between politicians working at national and local level, the results also show how *citizens and various groups of political actors* perceive Facebook and Twitter (see also, table 4, table 5 and table 6). Practitioners of political communication and citizens tend to evaluate the *political influence* of social media services as stronger than politicians. Furthermore, all groups surveyed tend to agree that journalists in particular are strongly influenced by social media services. Moreover, they perceive that politicians and journalists are more influenced by Twitter than by Facebook. The general public, on the other hand, is perceived to be stronger influenced by Facebook than by Twitter. However, all in all, the political influence of both Facebook and Twitter is considered as moderate. These results show that the perceptions of politicians and citizens have not much changed between 2012 and 2016 (e.g., Bernhard et al., 2014; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a). If the presumed political influence of mass media has not diminished in recent years dramatically, which is likely, then social media services are still perceived as less influential than traditional mass media. The *presumed reach* of social media services slightly differs between the surveyed groups. All surveyed groups presume that social media services, especially Twitter, are widespread among journalists. Compared to Twitter, Facebook is perceived to be more widespread among the general public and among politicians. The *perceived suitability* of social media services to get political information is moderate among political actors and citizens. While political communication practitioners evaluate Twitter as more suitable to get political information, city councilors and citizens evaluate Facebook as better for this purpose. The modestly perceived suitability of Facebook and Twitter for obtaining political information indicates that social media services

are not necessarily seen as the central political medium by citizens and political actors. However, since all surveys were carried out in-between election times, this perception could be different during election campaigns, which should be investigated in further studies.

5.2 What consequences do (social) media perceptions have?

The individual studies show to what extent (social) media perceptions influence demands for restrictions of online media, social media activities and perceptions of hostility. According to the research model, these consequences can be classified as (a) rectification reactions, (b) coordination reactions, (c) compliance reactions and (d) presumptions of others' opinions.

(a) In results of Dohle et al. (2017) show that citizens' perceptions of the political influence of online media causally influence their demands for restrictions of online media (rectification reactions). As already mentioned in chapter 4, this result is particularly important from a theoretical and methodological point of view, because most empirical studies dealing with potential consequences of (social) media perceptions are based on cross-sectional survey data and therefore, strictly speaking, only provide information about correlations (e.g., Tal-Or et al., 2009, pp. 108–109). Thus, the results strengthen existing studies, because it seems that media perceptions indeed evoke reactions like demands for restrictions. However, as only the influence of one perception on one potential reaction was analyzed and the empirical results are not as clear-cut as expected, more studies that focus on diverse perceptions and reactions are needed. Moreover, the study shows that different perceptual processes are causally related. The stronger people perceive the influence of online media, the stronger they perceive the reach of online media. As this result contradicts some theoretical assumptions (e.g., Gunther, 1998; Gunther & Storey, 2003) and the results of some empirical studies (e.g., Eveland et al., 1999; McLeod, Detenber, & Eveland, 2001), more studies are needed to clarify the causal relationship between different perceptions. Longitudinal surveys with more measurement points (e.g., rolling cross-section surveys) could help to analyze if there is a spiral process in which different perceptions influence each other reciprocally or if some perceptions are causally upstream of other perceptions.

(b) Two studies of this research project have analyzed the impact of perceptions on coordination reactions (Kelm et al., 2017, 2019). Precisely, these studies analyzed to what extent the political actors' perceptions of the social media suitability, influence and reach influence political actors'

social media communication. First, the results show that political actors' *perceived suitability* of social media positively influences their intensity of social media communication. Or in other words: The stronger political actors perceive that social media is suitable to get political communication, the more often they communicate via social media – probably to provide their audience with relevant information. This is an important finding, as despite of the clear relevance of perceived suitability for social media communication, only a few studies have so far taken perceptions of the suitability of (social) media into account (e.g., Nuernbergk & Schmidt, 2020). Moreover, in comparison to well-established theoretical perceptual processes like the hostile media phenomenon (Vallone et al., 1985) and the influence of presumed influence (Gunther & Storey, 2003), the theoretical foundation of the perceived suitability of (social) media is rather weak. To get a deeper understanding why the perceived suitability is of relevance, more theoretical work is needed. Second, *perceptions of social media influence* differently influences the social media activities of political communication practitioners and politicians. While political communication practitioners who perceive that their colleagues are influenced by social media communicate more intensely on social media, politicians' perceptions regarding the social media influence have no impact on their communication activities in most cases. Thus, presumed social media influences are important for coordination reactions, but not necessarily for all groups. As already mentioned in chapter 4, it may be that the presumed influence of social media for politicians is only relevant in election times. More studies are needed to investigate to what extent the circumstances moderate the relationship between perceptions and coordination reactions and why which groups are (not) influenced by perceptions of the influence of (social) media. Third, effects of the *presumed reach* of social media on political actors' social media activities are more or less similar to the results of the presumed influence. The social media communication of political communication practitioners is affected by their perceptions of the reach of social media, whereas the communication of politicians is not affected. Again, the presumed reach is a relevant independent variable for coordination reactions, but not for all groups. One reason could be that for some groups it is not important to reach a huge audience or many people within a reference group, but to reach some relevant persons like influencers of specific journalists.

(c) The impact of perceived audience expectations on social media communication is focused in one study (Kelm, 2020). The underlying assumption is that politicians want to satisfy the expectations of their audience. Thus, this behavior can be classified as *compliance reaction*. The study is one of the few studies that analyzed to what extent individuals' perceptions

influence in which way social media is used (and not only how often). The results show that politicians more often communicate via Facebook and Twitter in a certain way, the stronger they perceive that their audience expects this kind of communication. Thus, they orientate their communication towards their audience. This is an important finding as politicians are sometimes accused to communicate in a not very innovative way. However, politicians cannot be blamed (alone) for this kind of communication, because they largely know what kind of communication their audience wants (Kelm et al., 2019) and give them this communication. According to the results, perceived audience expectations should be considered in further studies that aim to explain communication behavior.

(d) Finally, we show in one study that people who perceive foreign news media as hostile and influential develop the perception that the inhabitants of the foreign country are hostile against them (Dohle et al., 2020). People thus derive the *presumed opinion of a foreign population* from the foreign media news coverage. Although the causality of this relationship is unclear, this result is important, because it could help to understand the conflict-intensifying effect of media perceptions in international conflicts. In particular, it is conceivable that these presumed opinions of others may cause compliance reactions (chapter 2.3.1) or defiance reactions (chapter 2.3.2). For example, people may develop greater support for the government of their own country (Wei et al., 2017), which could lead to an increase of affective polarization (Iyengar, Lelkes, Levendusky, Malhotra, & Westwood, 2019). The results show also that individuals' perceptions of the influence and hostility of media are correlated to each other, which is in line with theoretical assumptions and empirical results of other studies (e.g., Post, 2017; Tsfaty, 2007; Tsfaty & Cohen, 2003). Nevertheless, further experiments or longitudinal analyses are necessary to understand whether both perceptions influence each other reciprocally or whether one perception has a causal influence on the other.

5.3 How do the results fit the research model?

The aim of the model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions is to structure the research on (social) media perceptions. The empirical results of this research project show that the model is suitable for this purpose. Precisely, the results identify some *causes* of (social) media perceptions: The organizational background of politicians partly influences perceptions of audience expectations (Kelm et al., 2017) and Greek citizens perceive more strongly than

German citizens that the foreign news media is hostile and influential (Dohle et al., 2020). Moreover, in most studies, several factors were considered as control variables. For example, the results show that, regardless of their social media perceptions, politicians from minor parties communicate more often interactively via Facebook than politicians from major parties (Kelm, 2020) and that younger political communication practitioners communicate more often via Facebook than older ones (Kelm et al., 2017).

In the empirical studies of this research project, *perceptions of (social) media contents* (hostile media perception), *services* (perceived suitability), *audiences* (perceived reach, perceived audience expectations) and *effects* (presumed influence) were considered. Perceptions of (social) media communicators (e.g., trust) could not be integrated, which is a limitation for the evaluation of the model. In two studies, the relationship between different perceptions was analyzed: The results show that perceptions of the influence of online media have a causal effect on perceptions of the reach of these media (Dohle et al., 2017). Moreover, it was shown that the presumed influence of foreign news media and the presumed hostility of these media correlate (Dohle et al., 2020).

The results of this research project show, moreover, that (social) media perceptions have *consequences*. With panel data, it was shown that perceptions of the influence of online media causally influence demands for restrictions of online media (Dohle et al., 2020). These demands could be interpreted as rectification reactions. Three studies (Kelm et al., 2017, 2019; Kelm, 2020) show that (social) media perceptions can, but not have to, influence social media communication (coordination reactions and compliance reactions). Moreover, it was shown that perceptions of hostile and influential media influence perceptions of hostility (presumed opinion of others; Dohle et al., 2020).

Thus, many of the assumed relationships could be supported. However, there is *more empirical research needed* to test and further develop the proposed model. First, more *longitudinal and experimental studies* are needed to provide more evidence that perceptions actually have the assumed consequences and to test how different perceptions are causally related to each other. Second, *a more systematic research* on the consequences of (social) media perceptions would be helpful. For example, these studies should consider whether presumed norms of others or the anticipated behaviors of others mediate the relationship between perceptions and consequences. This could help to better distinguish, for example, between coordination and compliance reactions. Third, it would also be helpful to analyze if and how the potential

consequences have *backlash effects* on macro-, meso- and micro-level factors. For example, demands for restrictions of online media may lead to media regulations, which in turn may affect perceptions of the influence or of the hostility of online media.

6 Conclusion

The introductory example of the Cambridge Analytica scandal shows that it is often not clearly measurable how influential (social) media is. The same applies, for example, to the question of how many people (social) media services reach, how suitable they are for specific purposes and how biased their content is. Nevertheless, political actors and citizens develop perceptions of these and other (social) media-related aspects. Even more important, these perceptions can have consequences. For example, peoples' perceptions can influence their (social) media activities or their attitudes towards censorship measures. Although the political importance of (social) media perceptions is clear, systematic attempts to structure and empirically test the causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions are rare. This research project has aimed to reduce these theoretical and empirical gaps by developing a research model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions and testing parts of this model empirically. In doing so, eleven quantitative surveys among political actors and citizens were conducted, which resulted in six studies published in peer-reviewed journals. Primarily, the results of this research project contribute to (political) communication research (chapter 6.1). Furthermore, they have implications for (political) communication practices (chapter 6.2).

6.1 Contributions to political communication research

The *contributions to political communication research* can be divided into (a) theoretical, (b) empirical and (c) methodological contributions. These contributions result in (d) suggestions for further research.

(a) The *theoretical contribution* of this research project consists firstly of the development of the research model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions, which is based on a systematization of relevant (social) media perceptions as well as of their causes and consequences. The proposed research model is not perfect, as, for example, the various consequences are difficult to distinguish empirically – especially if different (social) media

perceptions are tested simultaneously and have different effects. However, as “even imperfect categorization (...) can be useful for conceptual and theoretical proposes” (Tal-Or et al., 2009, p. 110), this research model could nevertheless be a noteworthy step towards a theory of (social) media perception.

Secondly, it was tested whether established theoretical approaches from communication science such as the mediatization of politics thesis (Strömbäck, 2008) or the influence of presumed media influence approach (Gunther & Storey, 2003) also apply in a social media environment. The empirical results show that the assumptions of these approaches only partially apply in the new communication environment: Mediatization is proceeding slowly and presumed influences affect only certain political actors in their communication practices. The results have theoretical implications: More attentions should be paid to which theoretical assumptions apply under which circumstances and to which groups and to what extent the theoretical approaches have to be adapted to the new environments.

Third, it was shown that some explanatory factors, which are rarely used in political communication research – such as perceived audience expectations (Loosen & Schmidt, 2012) or perceptions about news coverage of foreign media (Wei et al., 2017) – can help to understand political communication processes. Moreover, it was shown that perceived audience expectations have more explanatory power than established concepts such as the influence of presumed influence approach. Theoretical arguments should therefore not only be based on established concepts of political communication science. Other research fields, such as journalism research, offer theoretical approaches that can be meaningfully adapted for political communication research.

(b) The *empirical contribution* of this research project lies firstly in detailed analyses of how (social) media perceptions vary over time, across borders, between different organizations, at different political levels and between political actors and citizens. Moreover, differences in the perceptions regarding Facebook and Twitter as well as regarding different reference groups became clear. The results also show that (social) media perceptions (causally) influence each other and that politicians’ perceived audience expectations largely meet the actual expectations of citizens. These analyses update existing findings (e.g., Bernhard et al., 2014; Dohle & Bernhard, 2014a). Furthermore, these results enrich our knowledge on (social) media perceptions and their relationships with each other.

Secondly, the empirical results of the research project show that (social) media perceptions have consequences. They not only influence demands for stronger restrictions of media, which is the most often analyzed consequence (Cohen & Weimann, 2008, p. 386; Feng & Guo, 2012). (Social) media perceptions also lead political actors to communicate more intensively in specific ways via social media and they affect citizens' presumptions about peoples' opinions from another country. The effects of (social) media perceptions persist even if several other factors are controlled. In addition, one study tested the causal direction between (social) media perceptions and assumed consequences. The results of this study strengthen the theoretical assumption that (social) media perceptions are upstream of potential consequences.

Thirdly, the results of the research project point to some causes behind the (social) media perceptions. For example, the size of political parties partially influences how their members communicate. Moreover, macro-economic factors seem to be relevant for how people perceive and evaluate the media coverage of another country. Thus, not only micro-level factors should be considered when explaining (social) media perceptions, but also macro- and meso-level factors.

(c) The *methodological contribution* of this research project consists firstly in showing how to achieve appropriate response rates in quantitative surveys among important political actors. Different types of contact were used for different groups of political actors: On the one hand, a cooperation with a specialist professional communication publisher was fruitful in order to gain access to communication practitioners. On the other hand, politicians should be addressed personally. This requires some preparatory work, such as the creation of a database containing information about German city councils. While city councilors and political communication practitioners can be effectively reached with online surveys, Bundestag members seem to be effectively addressed with a "dual-mode-design" (Masch & Rosar, 2020, p. 5), which also gives respondents the opportunity to answer with pen and paper. After a few weeks, e-mail reminders were helpful to increase the response rate. Small donations to charity organizations for each completed questionnaire were also helpful. In addition, all respondents were guaranteed the anonymity of their data. This probably increased the response rate, too. The major disadvantage of this approach is that the survey data cannot be linked to other data, such as social media content.

Secondly, it was shown how different (social) media perceptions can be measured adequately. Of the perceptions studied, only the measurements of presumed influences (e.g., Rössler, 2011,

pp. 255–259) and hostile media perceptions (e.g., Feldman, 2017) are largely standardized. In addition, measurements of the perceived reach, perceived audience expectations and perceived suitability were presented. The differentiated measurements allow better standardization of the research of (social) media perceptions. Moreover, one major advantage of the presented measurements is that they can easily be adapted for different (social) media outlets and different reference groups.

(d) In addition to the need for specific follow-up studies that were already specified in chapter 5, some broader *suggestions for further research* can be made based on the theoretical, empirical and methodological contributions of this research project.

For political communication research, it is firstly important to develop a theory of (social) media perception. Such a theory should combine the strengths of existing theories to gain a better understanding of political communication processes. It is important that such a theory is applicable in different contexts, because of the existing overlaps of the hybrid media system (Chadwick, 2013). To develop such a theory, experts of different (social) media perceptions and theoretical approaches should work together and combine their knowledge. The proposed research model of causes and consequences of (social) media perceptions could be one of several starting points for developing such a theory.

Secondly, further empirical studies are needed that test the assumed relationships in the proposed research model. These studies should also test for the causal direction of the assumed relationships. This is important, because meta-analyses (e.g., Oser & Boulianne, 2020) as well as studies based on panel data (e.g., Quintelier & van Deth, 2014) repeatedly point out that the theoretically assumed direction of the relationship between two factors is not necessarily empirically supported. Furthermore, comparative and longitudinal studies are needed to understand how (social) media perceptions are changing over time and vary in different contexts and to what extent they have, for example, conflict-intensifying consequences.

Third, a major challenge is to combine survey data on (social) media perceptions meaningfully with other external data like digital trace data (e.g., de Vreese et al., 2017; Stier, Breuer, Siegers, & Thorson, 2020). This external data is publicly accessible and can be collected using automatic procedures (but see, Bruns, 2019a). In order to combine survey data with external data, respondents have to agree to a reduced level of anonymity of their survey data. On the one hand, this procedure is associated with the risk that the response rates decrease or that the honesty of the answers decrease. This risk exists mainly in surveys with political decision-makers, which

is why this procedure was not used in this research project. On the other hand, the combination of survey and external data would probably lead to results that are more valid. For example, people over- and underestimate their political activities on Facebook (Haenschen, 2020). Therefore, external data seems to be more appropriate to measure various consequences of (social) media perceptions. Further research should work on methods that ensure a certain degree of anonymity while allowing for combination with external data. Moreover, these methods should be easy to understand by respondents, in order to avoid low response rates and dishonest answers.

6.2 Implications for political communication practices

The results of this research project have also some implications for political communication practices of citizens, political actors and journalists.

The results should encourage *citizens* to express their expectations of politicians' social media communication. Doing this is promising, because politicians try to satisfy these expectations. Moreover, citizens' external political efficacy may increase, if they notice the effort of politicians. Since politicians receive only few messages or indicators from citizens what their expectations are, citizens can express concrete expectations that go beyond statements such as "more discursive communication".

Politicians, on the other hand, should first recognize that not all citizens are interested in their social media communication. Thus, politicians do not have to be frustrated about small numbers of social media followers, as many citizens are also not interested in other political news. However, if they want to increase their visibility, they should try to improve their communication activities. Therefore, politicians should define which target groups they want to reach with which social media services. Exchangeable communication activities on all social media services are not promising. Instead, they should consider that different target groups have different expectations. In order to learn about these expectations, politicians must enter into dialogue with their target groups. This is time-consuming, but probably improves the quality of communication activities. Moreover, and probably most important, politicians should not only communicate during election campaigns. Continuous communication is the key to building visibility and trust, which could pay off on election day.

Finally, *journalists* should bear in mind that their coverage of hostile coverage from another country is likely to have conflict-intensifying effects in international crises. We know that news media generally emphasize negativity (Esser, Engesser, Matthes, & Berganza, 2017). It is therefore likely that journalists will also focus on negative or hostile reports against their home country when reporting on coverage of another country. Since citizens gain their knowledge about other countries mainly from the media, these hostile reports likely influence citizens' presumptions about the opinions of citizens from other countries. In line with the constructive journalism (e.g., Hooffacker, 2020), it would be meaningful to focus less on negativity and more on problem solving, in order to minimize conflicts.

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