

TWEETING THE WORLD A BETTER PLACE: MOTIVATION AND VALUES UNDERPINNING THE CREATION OF A DIGITAL COSMOPOLITAN PERSONA

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ABSTRACT

While the reputation of the platform Twitter was severely dented during the presidency of President Donald Trump, who often retweeted far-right content, this article engages from the argumentative assumption that Twitter is an inherently cosmopolitan online space, both in terms of statements found there and of the lived experience of users on the platform itself. Cosmopolitanism is understood as a normative concept and as a descriptive term for increasing cultural interconnectedness. Twitter users may engage in pursuing liberal aims by taking responsibility for or identifying with all humanity, and thus enact the more conceptual ideas of cosmopolitanism into pragmatic and viral utterances. They may also be deemed cosmopolitan influencers. Based on qualitative interviews with ten purposely selected Twitter users, it is argued that the motivation behind such online political engagement is chiefly societal and activist, and stems from a desire to change society and, indeed, to “give back to society”. Tweeters are guided by an array of values, such as authenticity, solidarity, justice and equality, and freedom of expression. These socially-engaged Twitter users also often see themselves as exceptional, and able to view social developments others cannot see. The data shows that positive reinforcing as well as negative discouraging feedback plays a crucial role and gives hints for the promotion of Cosmopolitan Twitter.

KEY WORDS

Cosmopolitan Twitter; Digital Interculturality; Postdigitality; Online Persona; Digital Civic Engagement

COSMOPOLITANISM IN THE TWITTERVERSE

The social media platform Twitter connects more than 300 million people worldwide every month (Twitter 2019). As part of social media (Baym 2011; van Dijck and Poell 2013; Hepp 2015), it unfolds within a previously unrealisable dynamic of ongoing, ubiquitous intercultural communication. Political Twitter communication was popularised by the unconventional election campaign of former US President Donald Trump, who recognised and instrumentalised the potential of the platform (Gounari 2018, pp. 212–225, Nacos et al. 2020). His slogan “America First” is virtually the epitome of nationalism and a diametric opposition to cosmopolitanism as a form of world-openness (Beck and Sznaider 2010, p. 382). Thus, Twitter received attention as an echo chamber of the authoritarian and nationalist-recursive right (Schroeder 2018, Nacos et al. 2020).

Viewed from a wider perspective, however, it may be observed that recursive nationalism has long been fighting a defensive rear-guard action in an increasing intercultural, globalised, and interconnected world. From the 19th to the mid-20th century, according to Petzold (2013, p. 58), “all processes in reality and in science followed the national idea” and cosmopolitanism was a quasi-romanticised “philosophical-normative expression”. But the catastrophes of the 20th century marked a turning point. The situation has been reversed: the world has broken away from nation-state unambiguity and has become *fuzzy* (Beck 2012, p. 113; Bolten 2013, p. 6). The present and the future are set within the wide cultural interconnectedness of cosmopolitanism, which has now become a social, pragmatic, lifeworld reality (Beck and Sznaider 2010, pp. 388-389), while (neo-)nationalism is the yearning of some for an “imagined past” (Beck 2011, p. 1354). This cosmopolitan reality is also evident on Twitter, especially as social media can be precise indicators of moods and developments (Cardoso et al. 2013, p. 219). Cosmopolitanism is evident in the representation of the agents who present themselves online as *personas* (Marshall and Barbour 2015, pp. 1-2) in order to find a positioning in relation to the outside world. Therefore, it is worthwhile to analytically turn away from nationalistic-recursive Twitter and turn towards what we would like to call cosmopolitan Twitter. Thus, we begin from the argumentative assumption that Twitter is actually an inherently cosmopolitan online space, both in terms of many of the statements found there and of the lived experience of cultural interconnectedness upon the platform itself.

As Delanty (2019, p. 3) stresses, cosmopolitanism is not just a synonym of transnationalism, but also “concerns ways of imagining the world”, is “more than a condition of mobility or transnational movement”, but is “particularly bound up with the expansion of democracy and the extension of the space of the political”. Indeed, the extension of the space of the political imagination beyond the local is central here to the personas of the Twitter users (hereafter ‘tweeters’) examined. While such a political imagination may be seen as having distinctly progressive elements, this does not fit easily into a simplified left-right framework. Thus, Twitter is not only fed by backward-looking personas, but also by a number of personas committed to cosmopolitan ideals. The motivation and values of these personas is the centre-point of this article.

COSMOPOLITANISM ON AND OUTSIDE TWITTER

Cosmopolitanism as a philosophical concept has been widely studied. As an idea and from a European perspective, it has undergone some change since the ancient Greek Stoics surrounding Zeno of Citium, throughout the Enlightenment marked by Immanuel Kant, and to the intellectual currents of the second half of the 20th century including post-colonialism, feminism, individualisation, and globalisation (Appiah 2007, pp. 12-20; Inglis 2012; Nussbaum 2020, pp. 6-14). However, the core question of cosmopolitanism remains unchanged: “How can we live as equals in a peaceful world?” (Krossa 2018, p. 139).

In the 21st century, social scientists have dealt with cosmopolitanism descriptively as an existing social reality rather than as a purely philosophical concept (Roudometof 2012, p. 115). Cosmopolitanism is no longer solely a desirable ethical normative idea, but may be seen as a banal, everyday, pragmatic description of global and intercultural interdependencies (cf. Beck and Sznaider 2010, p. 388; Beck 2011, p. 1348; Stråth 2012, p. 72). The ethical-normative cosmopolitan orientation is underpinned by generalised ethical ideas regarding humanity, such as the conviction that “each human being has responsibilities to every other” (Appiah 2007, p. 32) and is “worthy of equal respect and concern” (Nussbaum 2020, p. 101). These ideas can be translated not only into visionary concepts but may also become a pragmatic, cosmopolitan maxim for action by actively and publicly opposing exclusion based on “nationality, class,

ethnicity, or gender” (Nussbaum 2020, p. 101). Therefore, progressive or liberal thinking can represent the baseline for cosmopolitanism (Appiah 2005, p. 267) and thinking and acting becomes connected to a (cosmopolitan) engagement for topics that not only concern one’s own interests but also a more expansive solidarity concern for humanities’ needs (Robertson 2019: 248). Finally, cosmopolitanism as a “progressive humanistic ideal” has today been practically understood in reference to “social, cultural, political and economic features of the modern globalized era” (Skrbis et al. 2004, p. 116). Not solely a synonym for left-wing, liberal progressivism, cosmopolitanism lies beyond the right-wing versus left-wing divisions (Koopmans and Zürn 2019, p. 4), as many political progressives see the nation-state as retaining the pragmatic boundaries for their progressive politics, engage in a ‘softer’ type of internationalism and restrict the context of their argumentation to the national. Regardless, Twitter offers opportunities for the creation of a cosmopolitan, quasi-activist online persona worthy of further study.

Cosmopolitanism can be experienced as a digital lived reality. With the development of social media as a user-generated web form through sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter, a new era began (Stormer-Galley and Wichowski 2011, p. 170; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010: 12). The core of social media lies in the comparatively low-threshold possibility for users to generate their own content with a potentially high medial reach (Rosa 2020), reciprocity (Castells 2010, p. 389), and interactivity (Stormer-Galley and Wichowski 2011, p. 170). This fundamentally changes communication from a one-to-many communication to a many-to-many communication (Röll 2020, p. 119), while offering a more accessible opportunity for the majority of internet users to becoming producers and consumers of internet content at the same time (Kelly 2005; Ritzer and Jurgenson 2010). Negotiations and (intercultural) spaces of encounter, which previously took place predominantly in the national or were required substantial effort (travel, migration, deployment), now happen on a daily basis in digital space. We have steadily been breaking away from the hegemony of the local: *Social proximity* is moving away from the notion of *physical-local proximity*. Today’s cosmopolitans no longer disembark from ships to settle in the ports of arrival cities (Yeoh & Lin 2012, pp. 209-210) but figuratively *navigate* the Internet from home. Characterising digital cosmopolitans Appiah (2007, p. 137) writes: “They believe in human dignity across the nations, and they live their creed. They share these ideals with people in many countries, speaking many languages. As thoroughgoing globalists, they make full use of the World Wide Web.”

Questions around whether interpersonal social relationships on the Internet could fulfil the function of previous forms of social relationships were critiqued from the outset. As early as 1995, Giddens assumed that there would be no need for shared (physical) space and shared (synchronous) time in order to establish social relationships. By the 2000s, there was no doubt that virtual social networks function according to comparable principles such as *reciprocity*, *support*, and *interactivity*, even though their cohesion may, when compared to physical communities, be based more on asynchrony and on weak ties (Castells 2010, p. 389). However, as Röll (2020, pp. 123-124) points out, it is precisely these *weak ties* that are particularly attractive for the propagation of ideas in Social Media. This in particular makes Twitter attractive for people who wish to share their ideas for a solidarity-oriented, responsible humanity and have thus essentially become cosmopolitan influencers.

One of the ongoing social debates regarding cosmopolitanism surrounds whether cosmopolitanism must go hand in hand with financial, social and cultural capital and social resources (Woodward and Skrbis 2012, p. 129). Beck (2011, p. 1352) argues that cosmopolitanism is by definition unbound and inclusive, and Werbner (2012, p. 154) adds that it cannot be only the choice of an elite. Does this apply equally to digital cosmopolitans? The

cosmopolitanism taking place on Twitter detaches itself from hierarchical systems and enables participation with only a small input of resources. Representing a (potential) counterpublic to institutionalised communication, relativising and diversifying uniform and essentialist views, and establishing itself without spatial mobility, Twitter has the potential to be a cosmopolitan platform for anybody able to use it, while remaining also mindful of the digital divide, which disadvantages many people on social media, including those with low literacy and low computer literacy, with disabilities, and persons with low English proficiency (Singh & Zarger 2021). Thus, is Twitter cosmopolitanism inherently a “cosmopolitanism from below” (Kurasawa 2004; Appadurai 2011)? Stormer-Galley and Wichnowski (2011, p. 173) identified that politically and socially-engaged internet users from the 1990s to 2007 were generally well-educated and affluent. A 2019 study from PEW Research Centre (Wojcik and Hughes 2019) on Twitter users in the USA sharpens this picture. Their findings demonstrate that Twitter users are younger, and have higher educational qualifications and higher incomes than the US average. Their political views are more likely to be on the wide leftist spectrum. They are also more likely to articulate favourable views on immigration. Among particularly active Twitter users, such political positions are even more prevalent (Wojcik and Hughes 2019). Twitter is, thus, primarily used by those with a large degree of social privilege. Yet, Elon Musk’s activities since purchasing Twitter at the end of 2022 and earlier scandals regarding far-right activists on the platform, would also suggest that a relativisation of the ‘Twitter as leftist platform’ idea is necessary.

Cosmopolitan Twitter takes place in the environment of a postdigital¹ world. The dichotomy between a supposedly ‘not-real’ online and a ‘real’ offline world has now become obsolete and is giving way to the realisation that the internet also plays an increasingly important role in the supposed offline world (Thelwall 2013, pp. 69-70). Recent theoretical discussions have viewed the postdigital in terms of a “critical understanding” of technology’s pervasion of the social (Jandrić et al. 2018; Peters and Besley 2019). For Knox (2019, p. 358) the term postdigital is an attempt to outline what is new regarding our relationship to the digital, but also highlights the ways that digital technologies are “embedded in, and entangled with, existing social practices and economic and political systems”. Postdigitality also means that we frequently come into contact with an array of digital cosmopolitan flows, via our devices (Lenehan 2022).

TWITTER ENGAGEMENT: MOTIVATION AND VALUES

It is clear that Twitter has become a space for a type of argumentative (normative-philosophical) digital cosmopolitanism. But what is driving these cosmopolitan influencers? Cosmopolitan messages on the microblogging platform are (mostly) intended to reach a public (Marwick and boyd 2010, pp. 117-118). Are they therefore also the expression of civic or political engagement? According to Kersting (2013, p. 156), political engagement *inter alia* takes place in the form of “demonstrative democracy” (e.g. demonstrations, signature campaigns). Even if engagement research is primarily concerned with the physical world (e.g. Simonson and Vogel 2016), “demonstrations” or “petitions” on the social web should not be neglected from a postdigital point of view (Abbott 2012, p. 84). Especially in the case of statements on Twitter, characteristic features of “demonstrative democracy” as described by Kersting (2013, p. 156)

¹ We follow Sinclair and Hayes (2019) in not hyphenating the term ‘postdigital’ in order to normalise this concept

are very applicable: they may be seen as an expression of “symbolic participation” and certainly have an “appeal function”.

Engagement research recognises different reasons for political and civic engagement (e.g. Clary and Snyder 1999; Müller et al. 2016). Engagement motives can be summarised under the three umbrella terms *social motives*, *societal motives*, and *self-referential motives*. Of course, these are interwoven, and all three groups of motives appear in varying degrees (Clary and Snyder 1999, p. 156).

Social motives include aspects of social cohesion, but also emotional diversion, which is associated with engagement. Relationships are strengthened, and social exchange is perceived as enjoyment. The objective is *to be entertained* (Müller et al. 2016, p. 419; Clary and Snyder 1999, p. 157). By contrast, in the case of *societal motives*, the focus is on the appellative function. Committed people want—not infrequently for humanistic reasons (Clary and Snyder 1999, p. 157)—to influence their fellow human beings (Müller et al. 2016, p. 419). The objective here is the *shaping of society* (Clary and Snyder 1999, p. 157).

However, civic engagement does not have to be altruistic per se. The third category of *self-related motives* focus on direct or indirect personal benefits and one’s own needs and goals (Clary and Snyder 1999, p. 156). This can be the accumulation of expertise, or the gaining of reputational or career advantages. The objective is the *promotion of oneself* (Müller et al. 2016, p. 419; Clary and Snyder 1999, p. 157) and the values of those involved are superordinate to motivation. Huxhold and Müller (2016, p. 475) find that civic engagement correlates more than anything else with the values of “solidarity” and “creativity”. In the case of “solidarity,” the interests of fellow human beings carry even more weight than self-centred interests (Huxhold and Müller 2016, p. 476).

The idea that values underlie engagement is not surprising; they are the “vocabulary for attributing motives” (Thome 2019, p. 51). The immediate functions of value systems are to guide human action in daily situations. Value systems “lead us to take particular positions on social issues and predispose us to favour one particular position” and they are moral “standards employed to persuade and influence others, to tell us which beliefs, attitudes, values, and actions of others are worth challenging, protesting, and arguing about” (Rokeach 1973, pp. 13-14). Values are generally either self-centred or group-centred (Rokeach 1973). They therefore fulfil an important function of social integration and strengthen both personal and collective identity affirmation (Thome 2019, p. 47).

COSMOPOLITAN TWITTER AS AN AFFIRMATION OF IDENTITY

The examination of one's own self and the relationship to the social environment is the core of the identity question and is treated centrally under the concept of *persona* (Marshall and Barbour 2015, pp. 1–2). Identity is formed between privacy and publicity (Humphrey 2021, p. 21) which means through the “alignment of inner and outer world” (Keupp et al. 2008, p. 7). Keupp et al. (2008) argues that individuals are caught between two positions: They strive for “originality, [...] uniqueness, and distinctiveness” (p. 262), thus seeking differentiation from the environment, while simultaneously striving for “integration [...] into a particular group” and social recognition (p. 261). Individualistic and collective orientations are, therefore, in opposition. Identity is formed on the one hand through self-organisation and on the other hand through recognition by others (Lucius-Hoene & Deppermann 2002, p. 49); and thus by forming a personal identity, these contrasting poles are harmonised.

This duality is also found within the activities of cosmopolitan tweeters. Indeed, it stands to reason that individuals who present themselves in the hyper-public Twitter space, greatly appreciate recognition by and embeddedness in the “imagined audience” (Marwick and boyd 2010, p. 115). With the imagined audience, a “digital intimacy” is established and “serves a social function, reinforcing connections and maintaining social bonds” (Marwick and boyd 2010, p. 118). The “continuous performance” (Giles 2020, p. 20) in the public online space has the effect of a brand strategy (p. 25), for which the persona earns attention and recognition. According to Keupp et al. (2008, p. 256), the “feeling of recognition” arises from the interplay of three factors: (1) attention, (2) positive evaluation by others, (3) self-recognition/self-evaluation.

The final of these factors—*self-recognition*—bridges the function of *integration* with the function of *individualisation*. Twitter users may strive for recognition by the social environment, while also desiring the representation of a preferably ‘authentic’ online persona. ‘Authenticity’ is of course a problematic concept, not least in the internet context. Marshall and Barbour (2015, p. 6) mention the shift that has taken place from “the classic *The New Yorker* claim that online no one knows you are a dog, to [...] the expectation that online identities are authentic representations of an offline self”. Following Erving Goffman’s model of theatrical performance, it is questionable whether ‘authenticity’ is in itself something reflective of a non-performative reality, or whether every interaction takes place within the space of a performative situation, where every individual agent remains mindful of their conduct and their desired effects on the audience, and thus may be seen as always wearing a mask (Goffman 1956, pp. 2-4). Twitter users have to “negotiate multiple, overlapping audiences [...] to portray both an authentic self and an interesting personality” (Marwick and boyd 2010, p. 122). While doing so, the “credibility” and time-enduring “coherence” of the performance seems to be a central aspect of authenticity (Lacoste et al. 2014, p. 2). This mirrors again the dual elements of identity creation: the validation by others and the verification of the self (introduced beforehand as alignment of inner and outer world).

METHODOLOGY

In order to explore the argumentative assumption (established above) that cosmopolitan personas can be found on Twitter, interviews with Twitter users were conducted to identify motivating biographical and personality factors for digital cosmopolitans. Thus, the underlying empirical research is embedded in the field of qualitative social research in internet studies (Cardoso et al. 2013, p. 219). The research design pursues an interpretative approach, which, following Bakardjieva (2011, p. 61), examines the meaning, negotiation, and domestication of and by the internet in everyday life, and addresses the fusion of internet and everyday life. Issues of (narrative) identity (Lucius-Hoene and Deppermann 2002) of Twitter users are in question, and identity reveals itself as a “progressive process of one’s own shaping of life, which (re)constructs itself in every everyday action” (Keupp et al. 2008, p. 215). Episodic interviews (Flick 2019, pp. 228–237) with narrative-generating elements (Werner 2013, p. 141), were chosen as the principal method. The interview guide included narrative-generating questions about Twitter activities, respective Twitter biographies, motives, and values pursued in the virtual, the analog and hence the postdigital world.

To identify suitable candidates, we looked for tweeters whose tweets expressed the cosmopolitan ideals established above, firstly by showing a responsibility for or identification with potentially all of humanity, well beyond the national, and secondly by addressing the question of how we can live together as equals in a peaceful world. We accept that this general approach is highly subjective (especially in relation to ‘responsibility’ and ‘peaceful world’) and

can be interpreted differently from diverse viewpoints. To operationalise, we took the pragmatic cosmopolitan ideas of solidarity and connectivity to humanism and applied these to tweets concerning contemporary topics that represent challenges for the world, humanity and the environment. Specifically, we looked for tweeters engaging with (global) climate protection, international understanding, pacifism, pro-EU feeling, anti-authoritarianism, fair trade, LGBT rights, or a positioning against any form of group-focused enmity (e.g., against anti-Semitism and racism).

Since a principal concern of the research was the *personal* motives of the subjects, and Twitter was to be investigated as a cosmopolitan space for potentially *everyone*, accounts run on behalf of political parties, foundations or associations were excluded; only private accounts were included. The tweeters, being neither professional campaigners nor celebrities, can thus construct their persona on their own terms. Sharing tweets on cosmopolitan ideas regularly was important, with inclusion criteria requiring a minimum of 4 cosmopolitan-themed tweets per month, and this content constituting at least 10% of tweets in the year prior to the interview. Some tweeters engage mainly or nearly solely (50% or more of their tweets) in cosmopolitan themes (we call them *focused* tweeters), others cover cosmopolitan topics visibly (proportion of *at least* 10%), but among other interests (we call them *occasional* tweeters).

Under this premise, the operators of 66 Twitter accounts were approached and 10 interviews were arranged. These took place between September and December 2021 and were conducted and recorded using video conferencing software. The distribution of the participants in terms of country of residence, cultural affiliation, age, gender and Twitter activity can be found in Table 1. There was a variety in age (between 17 and about 55 years) and occupational status (students, employees, executives, self-employed). The interviews were carried out in German or English, while English was in use either as the native language of the participants or as a *Lingua franca* (for the interviewer and for the participants). The corpus of approximately six hours of audio recording was completely transcribed (except passages not belonging to the context, like microphone tests) and subsequently analysed on the basis of qualitative content analysis procedures (Mayring 2015). In order to increase validity, the application of interrater reliability was implemented by assigning three researchers and assistants to independently evaluate the data. It was especially applied in the case of highly interpretative questions, such as those concerning values and motives. Ethical evaluation of this research was completed by the German Federal Ministry for Education and Research.

The qualitative content analysis identified five thematic groupings across the interviews. Highly significant interview quotes have been selected and translated as necessary. The ten interviewees are identified as I1-I10, corresponding to their identifier in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Overview of Interview Participants

	Location (ethnicity / country of origin)	Sex	Joined Twitter	Number of Tweets (000s)	Number of Followers (000s)	Type of user (by proportion of cosmopolitan tweets)	Topics of interest
01	Germany	f	2020	< 1	< 0.1	occasional	antisemitism, racism
02	Netherlands (Ireland)	m	2016	10-20	2-3	occasional	racism, migration, diversity, disability, globalisation, LGBTQ
03	United Kingdom (Ireland)	f	2009	5-10	<1	occasional	LGBTQ, racism, disability, Europeanism
04	Germany (Turkey)	m	2021	10-15	3-4	focused	racism, migration
05	Poland	f	2018	50-100	3-4	focused	globalisation, climate change, human rights, authoritariani sm
06	Austria (Kurdish)	f	2017	5-10	< 0.5	focused	human rights, migration, peace, authoritariani sm
07	Germany (Mexico)	f	2011	< 1	< 0.5	occasional	global mobility, environment
08	United Kingdom	f	2016	50-100	20-30	occasional	authoritariani sm, Europeanism
09	Germany	f	2013	10-20	20-30	focused	climate change
10	United Kingdom	m	2019	1-5	2-3	focused	LGBTQ

RESULTS

Our analysis revealed a bundle of findings connected to the motivations and values of the cosmopolitan twitter personas. Beyond motivations and values, the analysis also encompasses attitudes (like Bleak Optimism, Modest Vanity and non-conformism) as well as giving an allusion to effects of resonance and mediated reach.

Motivations

As depicted in the preceding discussion, engagement research identifies three main motivations for civic engagement: *social motives*, *societal motives*, and *self-referential motives*.

When asked about their motivations for their cosmopolitan twitter activities, the interviewees focused primarily on *societal motives*. These are predominantly activist-oriented (“appealing to society and changing it”), and sometimes also altruistic (“giving something to society”).

“The only thing I want to get back is I want to get rid of authoritarianism, that's the reason I do it. I want people to wake up to who we've put into power [...] somehow or other, is make people wake up and say we've had enough.” (I8)

“I indeed have the intention of helping to start a revolution. So, this is not a theoretical discussion for me. I'm not doing this as a diversion, I want us to save our fucking future, and I'm honestly also trying to radicalise people, in terms of communication. [...] I'm very concrete about changing the world.” (I9, about the climate crisis)

“I think it's also a platform for me to make people publicly aware of problems that I see or things that are going wrong. I definitely use it to a certain extent for the purpose of social media activism or hashtag activism.” (I2)

Even though societal motives clearly play a key role for Twitter cosmopolitans, *social* and *self-related motives* can also be found. The *social motives* arise, on the one hand, from the desire for entertainment and, on the other hand, reflect the need to be integrated into a group.

“That is the power of social media such as Twitter and things like that. You bring like-minded people together. And you have kind of a voice where you can show people: ‘hey, there are actually a lot of like-minded people who think that we should stop investing in fossil fuels and whatever other kind of stuff.’” (I2)

“It's helpful because you are sharing information with like-minded people, who are trying to do similar work to you. [...] But it's not just that. It's about having a community of people of support.” (I10 about LGBT rights supporters)

Even if people often do not admit to *self-centred motives* – not least in the solidarity-based spectrum of cosmopolitanism – such motives are occasionally represented here too.

“Twitter, let's be honest, is a form of self-promotion, isn't it? So, I promote events, I promote talks, I promote things I do in a podcast. [...] Most of the stuff is focussing on activism and society and schools and inclusion and having that moral purpose. But as a consequence, you gain a reputation in a good way, which leads to people getting in touch, asking you for talks and things. And who knows, in future maybe jobs and stuff. So, I think they go hand in hand really, and I don't necessarily do one for the other. Obviously, it is a nice by-product.” (I10)

As motivations, especially the motivation to become committed in civic engagement, are highly connected to underpinning values, it is worth drawing attention to these in the next section.

Values

Reflecting the scholarly discussion, there is a fundamental importance placed on values for human actions (see the introductory pages). Indeed, many statements made by the interviewees could be used to elicit references to their values. Their narratives repeatedly revolved around four values: authenticity, solidarity, justice and equality, and freedom of expression.

Authenticity was evident from the following quotes, with similar sentiments expressed by others:

“I think, for me, it's really important that my account is about all of me. It's not manufactured.” (I8)

“If something is against my moral code, I try to talk about this. [...] So I try to promote all these values I believe in.” (I5)

The value of *solidarity* (i.e., the emphasis on or even the appropriation of the needs of others) plays an essential role.

“[I saw] certain minority groups that I felt really needed to be defended and supported.” (I3, about discrimination of LGBT and immigrants)

“I just wanted to promote and support people and human rights and humankind and a better world and to move away from that sort of vitriol and hatred. [...] humanity, that's the whole point. It's all about being human.” (I8)

Similarly, digital cosmopolitans share a strong sense of justice, a vehement rejection of inequality, and they also wish to keep fighting for human rights as well as for freedom of speech.

“[...] I believe that everybody should be treated the same way because we are equal. And it makes me nervous or aggressive when I just see that human rights are violated by the government, by politicians and so on.” (I5)

“It is always good to stand up for human rights. No matter where.” (I6)

“It is important to me that my opinion is clear to my fellow human beings. [...] I find it important to position myself.” (I1)

“In the Netherlands, there is ‘sprekvrijheid’, meaning things can be talked about, and you have the freedom of speech and I use it. They shouldn't have given it to me, if they don't want me to use it.” (I2)

Motivations and values have been core aspects deduced from the corpus. However, there are numerous further aspects, which round out the picture of the cosmopolitan Twitter users examined here.

Bleak Optimism

Being politically and societally interested, the interviewees regularly evaluated societal developments. These show a kind of paradoxical *bleak optimism*, which is a pessimistic (misanthropic) vision of the future combined with the (philanthropic) belief in the effectiveness of individual efforts for a better world:

“My great big fear was that we would have an authoritarian government. [...] We slip into fascism. I mean, for me it's as simple as that, you know.” (I8)

“Racism and ableism are increasingly being seen. However, it is not yet fully recognised that these social problems are also related to the ecological catastrophe, and [...] that all these crises become worse and more difficult because we do not solve the problem.” (I9)

“There's been more and more hugely reactionary stuff and populist stuff that needs to be addressed. [...] we're going to end up in a situation where all these people are demonised the extent that gay cannot be accepted in society anymore and that is hugely dangerous.” (I3)

“Just when I saw how awful the government was, I mean they were so much worse than I could possibly imagine [...] I realised I actually had an account with quite a big following and that maybe that voice was important.” (I8)

Having analysed that bleak optimism is characteristic for the interviewees, it is now of interest how they position themselves in relation to the broader society.

Exceptionality and Non-Conformism

It is striking that almost all of the interviewees perceive themselves as “exceptional” in some way. As a result, the interviewees repeatedly place themselves in outsider positions.

“I associate myself with a kind of hashtags [...] like #TwiceExceptional and #DivergentThinking and stuff like that. [...] My family, sometimes amongst ourselves, we speak as we are not part of the [...] society, [...] Now, I associate most closely the sensation of being ‘other’ with my intelligence. I think that people, who are on this autistic spectrum, have a different frequency. [...] The sensation of being ‘other’, I think, it helps me, or it means that in terms of diversity and gender or race, I very easily put myself in the shoes of other people.” (I2)

“We were political refugees. [...] That has shaped my life, including that of my family. We have very close family members [...] who were murdered, put into prisons. These are very real experiences. [...] Then, of course, growing up in a foreign country, with a different language [...], having to explain oneself, always having to meet the demands of both sides, European-Western and Kurdish traditional, was a balancing act.” (I6)

Therefore, the interviewees assume that they perceive social dynamics that others have not noticed or ignored so far.

“I'm quite an open-minded person, because I travel a lot and I see more things than people who don't.” (I5)

“Normal people, just like me when I was growing up, think that being wealthy and successful are the values you should strive towards. I think that is keeping people blinkered about what's happening in the world around them regarding power, regarding politics, and regarding the climate, all these kinds of things. They become trapped in an old system. They need to be shown a better way of how things can be.” (I2)

For some digital cosmopolitans, their own perceived “exceptional” role in society is accompanied by a non-conformist critique of political and economic elites and systems, or a questioning of authorities.

“We stop looking at what the problem is, which is governments and corporations who want to ultimately take away all our power and make us hate each other.” (I8)

“you have to take things into your own hands and somehow can't trust politics.” (I4)

“It is also about real awareness, i.e. creating attention. Look, that's a different perspective, it's not always like the politicians say, you can also look behind the facade.” (I6)

“It was the first time in my life, I think, that I also understood that grown-ups weren't always right. In fact, they were very very often wrong and that I should start questioning what a grown-up said to me.” (I3, about an anti-gay statement of an adult caregiver)

Social media (companies) are criticised by the tweeters as opinion-manipulating elites, even if they actively use them themselves.

“Social media is another tool to manipulate you. You have to be aware of that, so don't let yourself be manipulated. [...] I know that Twitter is a kind of machine, fuelled by algorithms which intentionally divide people. [...] I think in general, social media is rather a toxic environment.” (I5)

“So many people falling down so many rabbit holes and believing what's going on in the echo chambers with so many bots and sock puppet accounts. There are an awful lot of people who are incredibly naive about how social media works, and they just read one thing, and they believe it.” (I3)

The prior examples show the self-perception as “exceptional” and/or non-conformist. The following section now draws attention to the mediated reach and effects of resonance of these persons in the Twitterverse.

Mediated reach and Effects of Resonance

Participating in a hyper-public space like Twitter, the participants also reflect on the mediated reach they have and how it influences them. Of course, their Twitter activities do not happen in an isolated space, but are very much connected to other people's reactions, be they positive or negative.

“I never cared about followers. That didn't really interest me.” (I6)

“From a totally vain ego point of view, if I've posted something, and it starts getting a lot of likes and a lot of retweets, that's always nice [...] it's like 'yeah, I've been validated'.” (I3)

“I once left some clever comment on Marina Weisband's profile, which she then retweeted. It had around 5,000 likes, so it went through the roof.” (I1, about a comment on a well-known politician and activist's profile)

“If I write something and then a lot of people are retweeting it or a lot of people are commenting, it gives me some kind of energy. It feels like an endorsement of my viewpoint.” (I8)

In addition, qualitative data analysis reveals that digital cosmopolitans seem to be particularly capable of not being intimidated by negative comments. Above all, they are successful in not letting hostilities affect them when there is an intrinsic belief in doing the right thing, and when toxic discussions are avoided. For example, by blocking aggressors or by belittling them.

“I'm not that sensitive, as long as there's not someone standing in front of my door. [...] But what I actually do is to block out these comments. I don't just leave them.” (I1, referring to online harassment)

Following the presentation of interview results, we would like to engage in the following discussion, highlighting the most interesting results, and relating them to each other and to the underlying literature.

DISCUSSION

From the selected corpus, we have seen key elements which align the identity of cosmopolitan tweeters. The interviewees do not use cosmopolitanism as a self-narrative, but when asked they identify as “internationally active” (I01), “Citizen of the World” (I02), “member of the human race” (I03) and as an aspirant of being “a good human” (I07), which reflects a strong connection to the cosmopolitan baselines formulated by Appiah (2007) and Nussbaum (2020).

Although every individual has a unique self-narrative and views the world and society individually, there are common fixed points that characterise the cosmopolitan Twitter personas examined here. Twitter enables a persona to behave simultaneously and in playful alternation *performatively* (oriented toward self-expression), *collectively* (oriented toward the community), and in a *values-based* manner (oriented toward basic beliefs) (Moore et al. 2017, pp. 3–7). Through Twitter use, one’s own sense of identity is confirmed, while simultaneously one is embedded in the ‘collective identity’ (Keupp et al. 2008; Thome 2019). We also see a strong parallel between Twitter engagement and traditional, civic engagement (Clary and Snyder 1999) and argue that cosmopolitan engagement on Twitter can be understood as another form of civic engagement.

As seen in the earlier theoretical discussion, values are viewed to be superior to motivation (Thome 2019, p. 51) and are linked in self-narrations. The guiding principle of action for digital cosmopolitans is their claim to appear authentic. Whether or not authenticity—seen as performative in a Goffmanian sense—is possible at all remains irrelevant as the interviewees at least are convinced it is possible and achievable. They highlight that their account is “not manufactured” (I08), they emphasise that they promote only elements in line with their values and they wish to be seen by their followers (audience) as they see themselves. For example, I01 stated “I find it important that I position myself [according to my values] and that the others see it, and I02 argued “If I put something on Twitter I stand by that, you know, my name is beside it and I don’t use a fake profile or an avatar”. Here, the Twitter activity has the role of an identity self-verification (Keupp 2008, p. 262), being in line with Ellison and boyd (2013, p. 153) who state that self-representation in the virtual (but of course also in the analogue) space also serves the purpose of assuring to appear as the person one identifies as.

Adding to authenticity, the further primary values we can see are mainly from the field which Rokeach (1973, p. 7-13) has called group-centred: solidarity, justice and equality, and freedom of expression. This brings us back again to the idea of cosmopolitanism, as that a sense of wider solidarity—as well as justice, equality and freedom of expression—have been shown by scholarly discussion to be an explicit expression of a cosmopolitan attitude which gives the needs of others a high priority (Skrbis et al. 2004, p. 116). For the cosmopolitan Twitter personas presented in this study, freedom of expression is not just a mere democratic law, but is indelibly linked to the deepest of convictions and becomes part of identity.

Almost all of the interviewees perceived themselves as “exceptional” in some way. Among other things, they explained this with biographical experiences that have sharpened their perspectives. These included the opportunity (or necessity) to travel or to learn languages, or with personal traits such as autism. Their dispositions, presented by the participants as exceptional, have led them to believe that they perceive the social environment from a special perspective.

We have identified the world view of these tweeters as *bleak optimism*. It is a pessimistic vision of the future. In principle, the tweeters expect social conditions to deteriorate, at least if no active efforts are made to improve them. This pessimistic to misanthropic worldview apparently does not lead the tweeters to resignation or nihilism. On the contrary, it seems to encourage them to become engaged in order to prevent the foreseen catastrophes. In the belief in the effectiveness of the individual as part of a critical mass, something quite opposite to misanthropic pessimism is revealed: a sense of responsibility for the world and humanity as a whole that connects to cosmopolitanism (Appiah 2007, p. 15).

Another apparent paradox lies in a characteristic trait of digital cosmopolitans: on the one hand, the participants often express themselves modestly, not exaggerating their own personality, for example by stating that they are “not looking for followers” (I6), on the other hand, this modesty displayed in a hyper-public space like Twitter also seems contradictory, as a microblogging service like Twitter is fundamentally a “megaphone” (I4). The interviewees are also aware of this, so their own influence in the network is also taken into account, and occasionally celebrated. Drawing on Castells (2010, p. 389), we have deduced that successful social media is founded on reciprocity, support and interactivity. We could see this also represented in the results. The data shows that these reciprocal interactions are, logically, encouraging when positive. In addition, qualitative data analysis reveals that digital cosmopolitans seem to be particularly capable of not being intimidated by negative comments. Instead, they do not let hostilities affect them when there is an intrinsic belief they are doing the right thing. They avoid toxic discussions, for example, by blocking aggressors or by belittling them.

The research supports the theory of the postdigital society, in which online and offline processes merge and distinctions between the two ultimately dissolve. The digital cosmopolitans behave in a *postdigital cosmopolitan manner*. The interviewees are all ‘cosmopolitically’ active in domains that are not primarily internet-based, either in a professional context or in a private environment (family, friends). Thus, the postdigital applies to their public and private lives, as well as their activity both on Twitter and elsewhere.

CONCLUSION AND OUTLOOK

Digital cosmopolitans use Twitter to develop their persona as a representation of the self in virtual public space. They are very strongly value-based. In addition to solidarity, justice and freedom of expression, authenticity appears to be a fundamental value for actions on Twitter. Thus, the theatrical mask of the public persona loses some of its more disguising elements and shows (still performative) ‘authentic’ facets that are important for the self-image of the agents. The digital cosmopolitans are deeply convinced that they are doing the right thing, and they are also deeply convinced that *they have* to do it, especially in order to (positively) influence society on the basis of societal motives. Moreover, the motivations show that digital cosmopolitanism must be understood as a form of civic engagement, being primarily driven by *societal motives* and, complementarily, by *social motives* and *self-centred motives*. Although the engagement strengthens the integration into and social cohesion within a community, the commitment can also lead to finding oneself in an outsider position. The participants see themselves as “exceptional” observers of social events who do not necessarily belong to the mainstream, and they are united by a critical attitude towards authorities, and economic and/or political elites. They are characterised by “modest vanity” and perceive societal changes with “bleak optimism”.

Assuming normatively that digital cosmopolitanism is something worth aspiring to and contributes to a world community based on shared human rights, values and tolerance, the

question becomes, indeed, how cosmopolitan tweeting can be strengthened. According to what we deduce from our data, we suggest this takes place on three levels: a structural level, community level and individual level. Firstly, at a structural level, Twitter activists may be protected against threats and violence by the operating platform itself. However, since the platform level is beyond the immediate reach of users, the recommendations for action addressed by the interviewees focus on the community and the individual level. At the community level, positive reinforcement can outweigh negative feedback. Therefore, there are good arguments for actively using positive endorsements such as likes, retweets and even active counter speech. Finally, at the individual level, users who have acquired an ability to deal with discursive frustration and to find an emotional distance to the subject matter retain better possibilities for coping with online harassment. With this study we gathered new insights into Twitter users who actively seek to make the world a better place from a cosmopolitan perspective. These digital cosmopolitans are values-driven, highly motivated and socially-conscious. This makes them vulnerable, but also extremely valuable.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was written as part of the ReDICO (Researching Digital Interculturality Cooperatively) project funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF, Germany), grant number 01UL2002A