Radicalized by TikTok and Co.? The Influence of Social Media Use on Far-Right Orientations of Young Adults in Germany

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Summary: Right-wing extremism among young people often gets attributed to radicalisation on social media. This study examines how the use of various social media platforms affects extremist-leaning attitudes of young people in Germany. A particular focus is placed on TikTok, as the platform has grown rapidly among young people and is discussed in public debates as a potential influence on far-right orientations. Methodologically, the analysis is based on a representative online survey (n = 2,099; ages 16–27) with self-reported data on party sympathies, political self-placement, and social media usage intensity. The results show a positive association between the intensity of social media use and far-right attitudes. The findings also indicate that this relationship varies in strength across different platforms, and the platform TikTok does not stand out as a particularly strong accelerant of radicalization.

Keywords: Social Media, right-wing extremism, far right, AfD, youth, TikTok, political attitudes

Radikalisiert durch TikTok und Co.? Der Einfluss der Social-Media-Nutzung auf rechtsextreme Orientierungen junger Erwachsener in Deutschland

Zusammenfassung: Rechtsextremismus unter Jugendlichen wird häufig auf Radikalisierungsprozesse in sozialen Medien zurückgeführt. Die vorliegende Studie untersucht, wie sich die Nutzung verschiedener Social-Media-Plattformen auf extremistisch geprägte Einstellungen junger Menschen in Deutschland auswirkt. Ein besonderer Fokus liegt dabei auf TikTok, da die Plattform unter Jugendlichen ein rasantes Wachstum verzeichnete und in öffentlichen Debatten als potenzieller Einflussfaktor auf rechtsextreme Orientierungen diskutiert wird. Methodisch basiert die Analyse auf einer repräsentativen Online-Befragung (n=2.099); Alter 16–27 Jahre) mit Selbstauskunftsdaten zu Parteisympathien, politischer Selbstverortung und der Intensität der Social-Media-Nutzung. Die Ergebnisse zeigen einen positiven Zusammenhang zwischen der Intensität der Social-Media-Nutzung und rechtsextremen Einstellungen. Die Befunde deuten zudem darauf hin, dass die Stärke dieses Zusammenhangs zwischen den verschiedenen Plattformen variiert, wobei TikTok nicht als besonders starker Radikalisierungsbeschleuniger hervorsticht.

Schlüsselbegriffe: soziale Medien, Rechtsextremismus, AfD, Jugend, TikTok, politische Einstellungen

1   Introduction

In recent years, Germany and other Western countries have witnessed a rise in far-right attitudes, mobilization, and electoral successes of far-right parties. Scientific explanations for this development are diverse; at the same time, particularly in political and media debates about young people, the usage of social media is often cited as a main cause (Reinemann et al. 2019: 16, 20), while empirical research shows that the connections are significantly more complicated and less clear-cut (Schuster et al. 2025). While the strengthening of the far right cannot be attributed solely to the mediatization of social and political communication, actors of the extreme right have nevertheless been early adopters of social media across various platforms (Ebner 2019: 174). Some of these platforms enable direct communication with target audiences and significantly reduce traditional journalistic gatekeeping, even though they are not entirely unmoderated. Emotionally charged messages as well as misinformation and hate speech are both deliberately employed and are algorithmically amplified by platform architectures (Metzler & Garcia 2024: 739). Public debates about the role of social networks mirror market trends: years ago, Facebook was the focus of public attention; discussions later turned to the video platform YouTube and then to the messaging service "Telegram". With the surge in user numbers in Germany since the COVID-19 pandemic, the Chinese platform "TikTok" also moved into the public spotlight. These shifts reflect the fact that platforms differ fundamentally in their core functions, which in turn shape distinct real-world outcomes. While Facebook's architecture fostered the formation of closed communities, TikTok's influence derives mainly from its algorithmic recommendation system, its short-form video format and its capacity to distribute content rapidly to mass audiences. Against this background, recent election results raise the question of whether these evolving platform dynamics might be linked to changing political orientations among young adults.

Public and political debates often link the election results of far-right parties with the use of social media, especially by young adults. In the 2021 federal election, the vote share of Alternative for Germany (AfD) among first-time voters aged 18 to 24 was only 6.4 % – below the nationwide overall result of 10.3 % (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2025: 16). However, in the federal election in spring 2025, 19 % of 18- to 24-year-olds voted for the AfD – roughly equal to the population average (20.8 %). Only the Left Party (27.3 %) was more successful in this cohort (Die Bundeswahlleiterin 2025: 17). Recent state-level election results point in the same direction: in both Bavaria and Hesse, the AfD's support among 18- to 24-year-olds was close to or slightly above its overall average share (Süß 2023).

In general, studies suggest that extensive social media use can affect political attitudes and party preferences by increasing exposure to politically biased or affectively charged content across platforms (Oden 2023). In public debates, TikTok has increasingly been discussed as a potential factor contributing to the rightward shift among young people (Franke & Hajok 2023). Indeed, the AfD and its political milieu reach an especially large number of users there (Georgi 2024). However, the actual influence of far-right content on social media on the development of corresponding attitudes and party preferences of users is poorly researched. The present study addresses this gap using data from a quantitative survey of 2,099 respondents aged 16 to 27. The study surveyed, among other things, political orientations, party sympathies, and the usage intensity of various social media platforms. From this, the over-

arching research questions can be answered: How does the use (and intensity of use) of different social media platforms affect the affinity of young people for far-right attitudes and parties? Can the popular thesis of a particularly radicalizing effect of the TikTok platform be confirmed?

2   Research Background

2.1   Social Media: Usage Frequencies and Political Information

Social media facilitate the exchange of information based on digital networks and at the same time serve to maintain social relationships, organize daily life, or provide entertainment (Koch 2022: 471; Taddicken/Schmidt 2022: 4). A key feature is personalized recommendations based on algorithmic filtering processes (Schumann/Taddicken 2021, cited in Taddicken/ Schmidt 2022: 4 f.). While on many platforms, information is mainly distributed by users social networks (e.g. friendship networks, follow relationships), others prioritize content-based recommendation: On TikTok, instead of interpersonal connections, the algorithm ranks and distributes content primarily according to user interaction patterns (Liang 2022: 2, 6 f.). The growing popularity of social media is reflected in high user numbers: according to Kelm et al. (2023: 5), 81 % of Germans use WhatsApp at least once a day, followed by Facebook (51 %), Instagram (37 %), and YouTube (34 %). For TikTok, Twitter, Telegram, Snapchat, and Reddit, daily usage ranges between 3 % and 16 %.

In the process, users encounter political content either intentionally or accidentally (Gemkow 2023: 44; Koch 2022: 471). 36 % of users encounter political information at least once a day on Facebook, 34 % on Twitter, 30 % on TikTok, 23 % on Telegram, 16 % on YouTube, and 14 % on Snapchat and WhatsApp, respectively. Considering sociodemographic aspects shows that those under 30 encounter political content daily especially on Instagram (71 %), TikTok (65 %), and Telegram (57 %). Similarly, respondents with right-leaning political views report encountering such content primarily on Telegram (68 %) and YouTube (51 %) (Kelm et al. 2023: 8).

2.2   Far-Right Actors and Content

Social media do not necessarily provide a balanced representation of differing positions, as algorithmic recommendation systems often prioritize posts that generate strong engagement. This can lead to an overexposure to emotionally charged, polarizing or extreme content (Liang 2022: 2). Far-right actors capitalize on specific platform characteristics, including the lack of journalistic gatekeeping, low barriers to entry, and the algorithmic rewarding of scandalizing content. These dynamics make social media an attractive alternative to traditional media (Gemkow 2023: 54; Serrano et al. 2019: 215).

Serrano et al. (2019: 216) demonstrate that the AfD uses bots on Facebook and Twitter/X to make topics go viral and manipulate trends. Wolfgram et al. (2024) show by means of "Social Research Bots" (automated TikTok user accounts) that even a slight interest in political topics leads TikTok's algorithm to increasingly feed political content – especially from

the AfD – into users' feeds. Strategies of emotional engagement with positive and negative emotions play an increasingly central role in the far right's communication on TikTok (Lindholm et al. 2024, Cartes-Barroso et al. 2025). According to Reinemann et al. (2019: 96), 32 % of respondents encounter extremist content on social media by chance, 31 % through their regular use, and 21 % via friends. Between 1 % and 8 % receive such content directly, hear about it, or actively seek it out themselves. A multivariate regression identifies, in addition to frequency of social media use ($\beta = .105$) and news consumption ($\beta = .069$), factors such as deprivation ($\beta = .076$), experiences of discrimination ($\beta = .362$), and conversations about extremism in one's social circle ($\beta = .133$) as facilitators of exposure to extremist content. By contrast, higher institutional trust ($\beta = -.151$) reduces exposure to extremist content in the media (ibid.: 100).

Hohner et al. (2025) examine the development of right-leaning social media users and find an overall increase across all platforms. The share of these users is around 34 % on TikTok, Telegram, and Facebook, and about 25 % on YouTube and WhatsApp. Using a multivariate regression analysis, they found that the use of TikTok, Telegram, and Facebook predicts a higher likelihood of holding right-wing oriented attitudes (ibid.: 72). They particularly emphasize the essential role of TikTok in far-right mobilization, recruitment, and radicalization, which is fostered by the platform's algorithm (ibid.: 3).

2.3 Social Media Prism

Bail (2021) illustrates with his conceptual framework, the so-called Social Media Prism, that social media not only reflect existing political attitudes but systematically distort them through platform-specific structural features. The algorithmic rewarding of outrage, moral clarity, or provocation causes especially extreme positions and fringe voices to become disproportionately visible – regardless of their representativeness in society at large. Accordingly, not only affinity for extremist attitudes themselves (Berning/Ziller 2020) but also exposure to them on social media can be attributed to complex influencing factors.

2.4 Social Media Propelling Populist Parties

Although the influence should not be reduced solely to social media, there is nevertheless a correlation between the use of social media and voting for populist parties. Schaub and Morisi (2020) show that the expansion of broadband Internet in Italy and Germany causally contributed to the election of populist parties – namely the Five Star Movement (M5S) and the AfD. Using the Internet for political information significantly increases the likelihood of voting populist, especially among young voters. By contrast, the expansion of the Internet did not benefit established parties (Schaub & Morisi 2020: 763, 768). These effects are not driven by broadband access as such, but by the behavioural changes it enables, mainly regarding the increased consumption of online content in everyday life. Populist actors benefit from these dynamics through communication strategies that rely on anti-elitism and clear moral dichotomies (e. g. portraying politics in terms of "good" versus "evil") and reduce complexity. Such simplified and moralized messages tend to resonate particularly well in social media environments (see also Guriev et al. 2020). These findings are also supported by Schumann et

al. (2019: 930), who demonstrate in a regression analysis that social media use (β = .20) is associated with a higher likelihood of voting for the AfD.

2.5   Research Gap

The significance of social media platforms for far-right actors is thus well established. However, Hohner et al. (2025: 64) point out that so far there is little empirical knowledge about the concrete relationships between social media use and extremist-leaning attitudes. In public discourse and political debates, however, a causal effect – especially of TikTok – is often assumed (Marschall 2024; Burger 2025), which appears to be an oversimplification given other influencing factors such as socialization processes, personality traits, or value orientations (see also Berning/Ziller 2020).

Referring to learning theory, children and adolescents develop political attitudes depending on available offerings, which today are increasingly delivered via mass media and social media (ibid.). The propaganda often specifically targeted at young audiences is frequently concealed and combined with elements of entertainment (summarized in Dörfer 2021: 229). If such content is additionally legitimized and supported in the immediate social environment, the adoption of right-wing attitude patterns becomes even more likely (Fuchs et al. 2003, as cited in ibid.: 320).

Based on the findings and research desiderata regarding social media use on the one hand and affinity for far-right attitudes and parties on the other, this article investigates how the usage intensity of different social media platforms by young people in Germany affects the above. Given the importance of the platform for young people and the controversial public discourse, TikTok is of special significance in this context.

3   Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: The more intensively young people use social media, the stronger their affinity for far-right attitudes and parties.

To empirically test this hypothesis, we expect to find significant differences in the level of far-right orientation between groups with different social media usage intensities. Conversely, if no relevant differences are found, one can assume the absence of a relationship.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between social media use and far-right attitudes varies depending on the platform used.

Since social media platforms differ considerably in function, target audience, and algorithmic structure, it is assumed that their political effects also differ. It is expected that certain platforms correlate more strongly with far-right attitudes than others – independent of overall social media use.

Hypothesis 3: Intensive use of TikTok is associated with a greater affinity for far-right attitudes and parties than the use of other platforms.

This hypothesis is based on the assumption, often expressed in public debate, that TikTok in particular exerts a radicalizing effect on young people. It is expected that intensive TikTok

users – given comparable use of other platforms – will exhibit far-right orientations significantly more often than other groups.

Hypothesis 4: The relationship between platform use and far-right attitudes remains robust when controlling for sociodemographic variables.

If H1 and H2 can be confirmed, it must be examined whether systematic sociodemographic differences are responsible for these effects – for example, if primarily young men with lower education levels are the ones who use certain platforms particularly intensively and frequently. We need to determine whether the observed effects remain robust when control variables are applied.

Hypothesis 5: The more frequently users consume AfD-related content on social media, the more strongly they sympathize with the party.

This hypothesis refines H4 by focusing on the level of content. It examines whether not only general social media use, but specifically the consumption of AfD-related posts influences party sympathy. It is expected that more intensive exposure to such content – especially on TikTok – correlates with greater support for the AfD.

4   Method and Data

The dataset is based on a quantitative online survey of young people in Germany conducted in spring 2024 as part of the project "Rechtsextremismus in ökologischen Transformationsräumen" (Right-Wing Extremism in Ecological Transformation Spaces). In total, 2,099 German-speaking youths and young adults aged 16 to 26 completed the survey. The focus on this age group was chosen because it contains the most intensive users of social media platforms and is particularly relevant for debates about digital political influence in Germany. Moreover, the data collection was embedded in a research project explicitly designed to investigate political orientations among adolescents and young adults in transformation contexts. The questionnaire was developed and the data collection carried out in cooperation with the Institute of Applied Social Sciences (infas) between 25th of March and the 5th of April 2024. Prior to fieldwork, a pretest with 55 respondents was conducted and led to minor adjustments. For the analyses in this study, the dataset was weighted to adequately represent the population of young people in Germany based on federal state, gender, age, size of municipality, highest level of education achieved, citizenship and household size (Hascher et al. 2024: 4 ff.; Quent et al. 2025). Data analysis was performed using the SPSS statistical software.

Far-right attitudes were measured using a battery of six items (see Table 1) grounded in empirically well-established dimensions of classical far-right ideology, including ethnonationalism, xenophobia and antisemitic stereotypes. The items were adapted from recognized surveys like the "Mitte"-studies and reflect well-researched components of far-right orientations (Zick et al. 2025: 78). Although the battery does not constitute a single established scale, it captures core ideological elements consistently identified in prior research on far-right attitudes with a high internal consistency (Cronbach's alpha = 0.8). For clarity and sufficient group sample sizes, the mean values were re-categorized. To do so, the range of the scale was divided by the number of scale points to ensure an even distribution of categories (1.00 to 1.80

= 1; 1.81 to 2.60 = 2; 2.61 to 3.40 = 3; 3.41 to 4.20 = 4; 4.21 to 5.00 = 5). This approach allows for an illustrative depiction of the distribution and enables statistical analyses between groups with varying levels of far-right attitudes. Subsequently, depending on the research focus of the hypotheses, univariate (frequency distributions), bivariate (cross-tabulations), or multivariate (regression analyses) were conducted.

For the regression analyses, the recoded five-point scale formed the dependent variable. Although the recoded variable is formally ordinal, the five categories represent approximately equidistant attitude levels. Therefore, the regression treats the variable as continuous, which is a common practice in quantitative research and allows the application of multiple linear regression (OLS). The key independent variables were self-reported usage frequencies of 13 social media platforms, measured on an ordinal scale ranging from 1 = never to 4 = daily/constantly. To isolate platform effects from sociodemographic differences, the models included controls for gender, general education, region (East vs. West Germany) and community size.

All relevant model assumptions were examined using standard diagnostics (OLS). Multicollinearity was assessed via Variance Inflation Factors (VIF), which ranged from 1.02 to 3.25 and thus remained well below conventional thresholds (Tausendpfund 2022: 166), indicating no problematic collinearity among the predictors.

In addition to general platform usage, the users' exposure to AfD-related content on social media was also measured. Content exposure was assessed through the question "How often do you encounter information about the AfD on social media?" Participants answered on a six-point scale ranging from "never" to "very often". A parallel item captured the AfD-related content exposure specifically on TikTok. Taken together, these measures allow us to distinguish between exposure to AfD information on TikTok and exposure on other social media platforms.

Sympathy for political parties was measured using the item: "The Party (e. g. AfD) is…", which participants answered on a four-point scale ranging from "very unsympathetic" to "very sympathetic". In the context of the social media related variables, this scale provides an attitudinal indicator that allows comparisons between different user groups.

5   Results

5.1   Far-Right Attitudes

The items of the short scale are orientated on the so-called consensus group of far-right attitudes (cf. Kiess et al. 2015) and additionally take into account eco-nationalist orientations in line with the research project. For example: Among the individual items, the statement "What Germany needs now is a single strong party that embodies the national community as a whole" (own translation) receives the strongest agreement: 40.1 % rather or fully agree with the statement. This is followed by "What our country needs today is a tough and vigorous assertion of German interests against foreign countries." (own translation) (36.5 %) and "Not only our environment, but also our people must be kept pure." (own translation) (35.5 %). The statements "Foreigners only come here to exploit the welfare state" (own translation), "As in nature, the stronger should always prevail in society" (own translation) and "Jews use more

wicked tricks than other people to achieve what they want." (own translation) were somewhat less supported, with 20.0 % to 25.7 % rather/fully agreeing.

Table 1: Response distribution for each item of the far-right attitudes scale and for the overall scale

Statement (mean)	Completely disagree	Rather disagree	Neutral	Rather agree	Completely agree
Not only our environment, but also our people must be kept pure (2.85)	24.1 % (N=467)	15.0 % (N=291)	25.4 % (N=493)	23.2 % (N=451)	12.3 % (N=239)
What Germany needs now is a single strong party that embodies the national community as a whole (3.07)	15.6 % (N=300)	16.8 % (N=323)	27.5 % (N=529)	24.9 % (N=480)	15.2 % (N=292)
What our country needs today is a hard and energetic enforcement of German interests against foreign states (3.08)	11.7 % (N=226)	17.7 % (N=343)	34.1 % (N=659)	23.8 % (N=459)	12.7 % (N=245)
Foreigners only come here to exploit the welfare state (2.62)	26.9 % (N=529)	19.8 % (N=388)	27.5 % (N=541)	16.1 % (N=317)	9.6 % (N=189)
Jews use more wicked tricks than others to get what they want (2.27) *(own translation)*	42.2 % (N=771)	16.1 % (N=294)	21.5 % (N=393)	13.3 % (N=243)	6.9 % (N=125)
As in nature, the stronger should always prevail in society (2.59)	23.4 % (N=437)	25.5 % (N=475)	28.2 % (N=526)	14.8 % (N=277)	8.1 % (N=151)
Far-right attitudes scale (2.67)	17.6 % (N=366)	24.2 % (N=501)	35.7 % (N=741)	18.7 % (N=388)	3.8 % (N=78)

(Original scale from 1 = completely disagree to 5 = completely agree)

Overall, 22.5 % of respondents rather or fully agree with the far-right attitudes scale, 35.7 % choose "teils/teils" (partly/partly), and 41.8 % rather or fully disagree; the mean is 2.67. Various sociodemographic characteristics indicate different affinities for far-right attitudes: for example, the mean for men is 2.80, whereas for women it is 2.52. In terms of obtained or intended education levels, it appears that higher levels of education are associated with lower mean values: lower secondary school (Hauptschule) 3.07; intermediate secondary school (Realschule) 2.82; university entrance qualification (Abitur) 2.49. An exception is the category "no school degree" (M = 2.83), which can be attributed to the small group size (n = 63). A similar trend, although with overall smaller differences, is seen for residence in more rural vs. more urban areas: rural community 2.78; small town 2.73; mid-sized town 2.70; large city 2.50.

5.2   Sympathy for Far-Right Parties

Table 2 presents the levels of sympathy for far-right parties. The far-right micro-parties "Der III. Weg"/ "Die Heimat"/ "Die Rechte" are overall more disliked by respondents (83.2 % rather/very unsympathetic) than the AfD at 77.8 %. Less than a quarter indicate that they find the AfD sympathetic (22.2 % rather/very sympathetic); for "Der III. Weg"/ "Die Heimat"/ "Die Rechte," this share is 16.8 %. The mean values (AfD 1.67; Der III. Weg/Die Heimat/Die Rechte 1.58) also point to low sympathy for these far-right parties.

Table 2: Sympathy for AfD and far-right fringe parties (percentages and means; 1 = very unsympathetic, 4 = very sympathetic)

	AfD (n = 1,851)	III. Weg/Die Heimat/ Die Rechte (n = 1,236)
Very unsympathetic	65.6%	63.9%
Rather unsympathetic	12.2%	19.3%
Rather sympathetic	11.8%	12.2%
Very sympathetic	10.4%	4.6%
Mean	**1.67**	**1.58**

5.3   Usage Patterns of Different Social Media

Table 3 shows the responses regarding the usage intensity of various social media platforms by the respondents. WhatsApp (81%), Instagram (66%), and YouTube (53%) are the most frequently used platforms on a daily basis. TikTok (48%) and Snapchat (44%) follow at some distance. Platforms like Facebook, BeReal, X/Twitter, and Telegram are used much less often; over 40% of respondents do not use each of them at all. Particularly low usage rates are observed for Gettr (part of Donald Trump's media company Truth Social) and imageboards, which over three-quarters of respondents do not use at all. The data illustrate on one hand the great importance of social media use for young people in Germany, and on the other hand the heavy concentration of intensive use on a few dominant platforms.

Table 3: Usage intensity of various social media platforms

Platform	Daily/ Constant	Several times/ week	Several times/month or less	Never
WhatsApp	81%	9%	8%	2%
Instagram	66%	14%	13%	7%
YouTube	53%	22%	21%	4%
TikTok	48%	12%	16%	25%
Snapchat	44%	13%	19%	23%
Facebook	23%	11%	26%	40%
BeReal	16%	10%	17%	57%
X / Twitter	15%	11%	23%	52%
Telegram	13%	10%	24%	53%
Reddit	13%	9%	28%	51%
Twitch	12%	13%	30%	45%
Gettr	5%	5%	11%	78%
Imageboards (e.g. 4chan)	5%	5%	14%	76%

5.4   Relationship Between Social Media Use and Far-Right Attitudes and Party Sympathy

Hypothesis 1 posits that increasing intensity of social media use is accompanied by a stronger affinity for far-right attitudes and parties. Hypothesis 2 states that the relationship between use and far-right attitudes and parties varies depending on the platform used.

These relationships can be demonstrated by the aggregated mean values of the "far-right attitudes" index across four levels of usage intensity (cf. Table 4). The scale values increase systematically from M = 2.45 among people who do not use social media at all, through M = 2.77 (several times per month/less often) and M = 2.86 (several times per week), up to M = 3.04 among people who use social media daily or continuously. This trend indicates a clear positive relationship between frequency of use and the extent of far-right orientations, with even moderate usage intensity already associated with a distinctly above-average (above 2.67) mean on the right-wing extremism scale. While differences between the middle groups (e. g., several times per week vs. daily) are only moderate, the contrast between non-users and intensive users is pronounced and points to potentially cumulative effects of media exposure.

Looking at the mean values table (Table 4) also reveals considerable differences between individual platforms: The highest average far-right attitude values are found among users of imageboards (e. g., 4Chan) with M = 3.35 (N=190), Gettr with M = 3.34 (N=191), Telegram with M = 3.14 (N=471), and Twitch with M = 3.08 (N=493). In the middle range are Facebook (M = 3.04) (N=667), X/Twitter (M = 2.95) (N=500), and Reddit (M = 2.94) (N=422). Comparatively low values – near the overall sample mean (2.67) – are seen for TikTok (M = 2.76) (N=1,200), WhatsApp (M = 2.72) (N=1,826), Instagram (M = 2.69) (N=1,617), and YouTube (M = 2.65) (N=1,529).

TikTok occupies a position at the lower middle in the platform comparison. Although the platform is often discussed as particularly important for processes of right-wing radicalization and normalization, the observed group values of far-right orientations do not stand out in general even with intensive use. Platform-specific differences are also evident for party sympathy (see Table 5).

The results provide empirically robust support for Hypotheses 1 and 2: the relationship between intensive platform use and far-right attitudes as well as party sympathies varies by platform – the group differences are statistically significant and substantive.

Table 4: Mean values on far-right attitudes index (1 = completely disagree, 5 = completely agree), by platform usage frequency

Platform (overall mean)	Never use	Several times/month or less	Several times/ week	Daily/ Constant
Telegram (2.87)	2.39	2.82	3.00	3.28
WhatsApp (2.66)	2.18	3.01	2.82	2.63
Facebook (2.77)	2.41	2.57	2.90	3.18
Instagram (2.66)	2.44	2.81	2.72	2.65
BeReal (2.79)	2.50	2.79	2.97	2.88
X / Twitter (2.78)	2.50	2.71	2.86	3.05
YouTube (2.65)	2.78	2.51	2.50	2.79
Reddit (2.77)	2.52	2.68	2.87	3.01
Snapchat (2.65)	2.51	2.53	2.79	2.76

Platform (overall mean)	Never use	Several times/month or less	Several times/ week	Daily/ Constant
TikTok (2.64)	2.27	2.77	2.69	2.83
Twitch (2.81)	2.48	2.60	2.87	3.29
Imageboards (e. g. 4chan) (3.06)	2.45	3.06	3.13	3.58
Gettr (3.07)	2.47	3.14	3.12	3.56

5.5   Does TikTok Use Particularly Promote Far-Right Attitudes and Party Sympathies?

First, a within-platform comparison shows that more intensive use tends to be associated with higher sympathy scores for the AfD and the small far-right fringe parties (see Table 5). However, this trend varies in strength by platform. For instance, Telegram shows a clear increase: respondents who do not use Telegram at all rate the AfD on average at a very low 1.51, whereas daily Telegram users reach a mean of 2.06. Similarly marked is the increase for the far-right fringe parties from 1.30 (non-users) to 2.18 (daily users). Facebook also exhibits a clear difference: without Facebook use, the AfD sympathy score is 1.50, while among heavy Facebook users it rises to 1.88. For the fringe parties, there is an increase from 1.36 to 1.89. These findings suggest that particularly on certain platforms (Telegram, Facebook), intensive use is associated with a greater openness toward right-wing parties.

TikTok users also exhibit a usage-intensity effect, but in a more moderate form. Without TikTok use, respondents' average AfD sympathy score is 1.55, whereas daily or very frequent users reach a mean of 1.71. For the fringe parties, the score rises correspondingly from 1.34 to 1.69. This increase is present but less pronounced than on the aforementioned platforms. Heavy TikTok users differ only slightly from TikTok non-users in their still rather negative view of the AfD, whereas, for example, Telegram heavy users are much more positively disposed toward the AfD than Telegram non-users. On YouTube, heavy users on average do not show greater sympathy than non-users (AfD ~1.7 for both; fringe parties ~1.65). The same goes for Instagram, where the values remain nearly unchanged (AfD 1.62 vs. 1.66, n.s.; fringe parties ~1.5). These counterexamples suggest that not every platform is associated with an increased affinity for right-wing parties to the same degree – the dynamics appear to be platform-specific.

Regarding Hypothesis 3, the results show that intensive TikTok use is on average associated with a similarly high, in part even lower, affinity for far-right parties compared to the use of other major platforms. Thus, heavy TikTok users are not the group with the highest far-right sympathy scores – in this respect, they are clearly surpassed by heavy users of Telegram, Facebook, or X.

Table 5: Mean values for AfD / far-right fringe party sympathy (1 = very unsympathetic; 4 = very sympathetic), and share of respondents who find the parties "rather/very sympathetic" (in %), by platform usage frequency

intensity of use Platform	Sympathy for AfD (mean / %)		Sympathy for III. Weg/Die Heimat/ Die Rechte (mean / %)	
	never	daily/ constantly	never	daily/ constantly
Telegram	1.51 (17.5%)	→ 2.06 (33.4%)	1.30 (6.8%)	→ 2.18 (36.6%)
WhatsApp	1.68 (9.6%)	→ 1.65 (21.7%)	1.44 (11.8%)	→ 1.51 (14.3%)
Facebook	1.50 (16.8%)	→ 1.88 (29.2%)	1.36 (9.4%)	→ 1.89 (27.6%)
Instagram (n.s.)	1.62 (21.1%)	→ 1.66 (21.6%)	1.46 (10.2%)	→ 1.57 (17.5%)
BeReal (n.s.)	1.66 (23%)	→ 1.67 (21.6%)	1.39 (9.1%)	→ 1.71 (23.1%)
X / Twitter	1.62 (21.3%)	→ 1.77 (25.4%)	1.42 (11.4%)	→ 1.88 (25.6%)
YouTube	1.74 (21.5%)	→ 1.73 (24.6%)	1.65 (20.5%)	→ 1.65 (19.1%)
Reddit	1.60 (20.8%)	→ 1.86 (26.3%)	1.36 (7.7%)	→ 1.86 (25.2%)
Snapchat (n.s.)	1.63 (21%)	→ 1.72 (23%)	1.44 (12.4%)	→ 1.61 (18%)
TikTok	1.55 (17.4%)	→ 1.71 (24.3%)	1.34 (8.2%)	→ 1.69 (21.6%)
Twitch (n.s.)	1.63 (21.1%)	→ 1.77 (23.7%)	1.38 (10%)	→ 1.93 (28.6%)
Imageboards	1.59 (20.2%)	→ 2.02 (32.1%)	1.36 (8.5%)	→ 2.47 (46.3%)
Gettr	1.61 (21.1%)	→ 2.29 (41.8%)	1.36 (8.4%)	→ 2.46 (47%)
Overall	1.61 → 1.83		1.40 → 1.88	

(Note: The arrows indicate the mean differences between non-users and daily/constant users, e.g.: People who don't use Telegram at all report a rather low sympathy for the AfD party (1.51), whereas daily/ constant Telegram-users report an overall higher sympathy (2.06).; n.s. = not statistically significant)

5.6 Regression Analysis

To assess whether the observed relationships remain robust when controlling for socio-demographic characteristics, we conducted a multiple linear regression analysis (OLS) using the mean index of far-right attitudes as the dependent variable (see Table 6). Based on these results, Hypothesis 4 – which assumes that the relationship between platform use and far-right attitudes cannot be explained solely by sociodemographic factors – is supported.

In particular, frequent use of Facebook, Telegram, TikTok, Twitch, YouTube, and imageboards (e.g., 4Chan) is associated with higher values on the far-right attitudes index: the regression coefficients for these variables are positive and statistically significant. The strongest effects are observed for Facebook (B = 0.138, $p < 0.001$), Telegram (B = 0.152, $p < 0.001$), and TikTok (B = 0.122, $p < 0.001$). This means an increase in usage frequency on these platforms is associated with an increase in the far-right attitudes index. Imageboards (B = 0.170, $p < 0.05$) and Twitch (B = 0.096, $p < 0.05$) also show significantly positive coefficients. The effect of YouTube is somewhat more moderate (B = 0.065, $p < 0.05$). For comparison: the standardized coefficients (betas) for Facebook, TikTok, and Telegram are each around +0.14, and are thus as high as or higher than the effects of many sociodemographic characteristics. These findings imply that intensive use of these platforms is accompanied by a significantly stronger propensity toward far-right views.

By contrast, the only platform negatively linked with far-right attitudes is Reddit. Here, a significantly negative regression coefficient is observed (B = –0.091, p < 0.05). In other words, heavy Reddit users tend to have lower values on the attitude index – frequent Reddit use, controlling for the other variables, is associated with weaker far-right attitudes. This represents a remarkable counterpoint to the positive effects mentioned above.

For the other platforms studied, no significant unique effects emerge when sociodemographic factors are taken into account. Neither the use of Instagram, WhatsApp, Twitter/X, Snapchat, nor the new services BeReal or Gettr showed a statistically significant relationship with the attitude index in the model (all p > 0.1). This suggests that mere presence on mainstream or niche platforms of this kind – unlike the special platforms mentioned above – does not exert an independent influence on far-right attitudes, provided differences in user composition are controlled for.

As expected, sociodemographic factors play an important role in the variations of far-right attitudes. Several control variables show significant effects in plausible directions:

- **Gender:** On average, men display higher far-right attitude scores than women. Gender is highly significant in the model (B = –0.23, p < 0.001).
- **Education:** A higher level of formal education is associated with lower far-right attitudes. The effect of education level is significantly negative (B = –0.130, p < 0.001). Respondents with a university entrance qualification have, on average, less agreement with far-right statements than those with lower school degrees.
- **Community size (urban vs. rural):** Place of residence also significantly influences attitudes. Respondents from larger cities tend to hold fewer far-right views than those from smaller towns or rural areas. The coefficient for the city/rural variable is negative (B = –0.108) and statistically significant (p < 0.001).
- **Region (East vs. West):** By contrast, regional origin from East or West Germany shows no significant effect in the controlled model (B = 0.009, p = 0.900).

The negative Reddit effect could indicate that different discourse cultures dominate on Reddit, so that heavy use there rather "protects" against far-right affinities, or that such individuals avoid this platform. The fact that Instagram and WhatsApp have no effect might mean that these mainstream platforms are used in a more politically neutral way, or that their user base is so heterogeneous that no uniform directional effect emerges.

This model was additionally tested for AfD sympathy. Again, certain social media platforms emerged whose use encourages inclination toward this party: Telegram (B = 0.155, p < 0.001), Facebook (B = 0.059, p < 0.05), and Imageboards (e. g., 4Chan) (B = 0.041, p < 0.05). Regarding control variables, men sympathize more with the AfD than women (B = –2.85, p < 0.001). The same holds for respondents living in East Germany (B = 0.327, p < 0.001) and in rural areas (B = –0.110, p < 0.001).

Overall, the findings clearly support Hypothesis 4: the relationships between social media platform use and far-right attitudes cannot be fully explained solely by sociodemographic differences. Rather, significant platform effects persist, pointing to an independent association between usage intensity and far-right orientations. This implies that platform-specific dynamics, in combination with user characteristics, play a role in shaping these attitudinal patterns.

Table 6: Regression analysis (excerpt) – influence of social media use on far-right attitudes, controlling for sociodemographic variables

Predictor (B)	B-co-efficient	Std. Error	Standardized Beta	Significance
R²	0.219			
Adjusted R²	0.210			
(Constant)	2.476	0.276	–	.000
Gender (male vs. female)	–0.231	0.061	–0.105	.000
Highest school degree (general education)	–0.130	0.036	–0.090	.000
Region (East vs. West Germany)	0.009	0.069	0.003	.900
Urban vs. rural residence	–0.108	0.023	–0.113	.000
Frequency of use:				
Telegram	0.152	0.031	0.143	.000
WhatsApp	–0.030	0.050	–0.016	.539
Facebook	0.138	0.025	0.147	.000
Instagram	–0.024	0.031	–0.020	.451
BeReal	0.002	0.027	0.002	.942
X / Twitter	–0.046	0.031	–0.046	.138
YouTube	0.065	0.033	0.052	.045
Reddit	–0.091	0.034	–0.082	.008
Snapchat	0.012	0.024	0.013	.622
TikTok	0.122	0.023	0.143	.000
Twitch	0.096	0.035	0.090	.006
imageboards (e.g., 4chan)	0.170	0.061	0.116	.006
Gettr	0.064	0.062	0.044	.301

(Note: VIF diagnostics were used to assess multicollinearity. Tolerance values ranged from 0.31 to 0.98; corresponding VIF values ranged from 1.02 to 3.25.)

5.5 Results for H5: The More Frequently Users are Exposed to AfD-Related Content on Social Media, the More They Sympathize with the Party

The results show a clear positive correlation between how frequently people consume AfD-related content on social media and their sympathy for the AfD (see Table 7). Especially on TikTok, the average AfD sympathy rises from only about 1.46 among respondents who are never exposed to AfD content there to about 1.92 among those who very frequently watch AfD-related videos. A similar pattern is seen on other platforms: those who encounter no AfD content on other social media channels (e.g., Instagram, YouTube) have an average very low sympathy score of around 1.48, whereas people with very frequent AfD content exposure on other platforms have a significantly higher score of 2.19. An independent-samples t-test shows that respondents who very frequently encounter AfD-related content on TikTok report significantly higher levels of AfD-sympathy than those who never encounter such content, $t(308) = –3.61$, $p < .001$. The same pattern appears on other platforms, $t(192) = –4.43$, $p < .001$.

Table 7: Mean AfD sympathy (1 = very unsympathetic; 4 = very sympathetic) by frequency of AfD-related content exposure

Frequency of AfD exposure	TikTok	Other platforms
0 = Never	1.4639	1.4787
1	1.4299	1.3600
2	1.7469	1.5680
3	1.6947	1.5850
4	1.8719	1.4678
5 = Very often	1.9151	2.1945
Total sample mean	**1.7192**	**1.5882**

A comparable pattern emerges with regard to the far-right attitudes index (mean scale 1–5) (see Table 8). People with no AfD content contact on TikTok have an average of about 2.62 on the right-wing extremism index, whereas respondents who very frequently see AfD content there average 3.03 points. In comparison, on other social media platforms the index value rises from roughly 2.23 (no AfD content at all) to 2.83 with very frequent AfD content exposure. In other words, intensive contact with AfD-related posts clearly correlates with a higher agreement with far-right positions. According to an independent-samples t-test, respondents who very frequently encounter AfD-related content on TikTok report significantly higher levels of far-right attitudes than those who never encounter such content, $t(353) = -4.63$, $p < .001$. The same pattern appears on other platforms, $t(212) = -4.02$, $p < .001$.

Table 8: Mean far-right attitudes index (1 = fully disagree, 5 = fully agree) by frequency of AfD-related content exposure

Frequency of AfD exposure	TikTok	Other platforms
0 = Never	2.6215	2.2283
1	2.8409	2.2097
2	2.6672	2.4949
3	2.7058	2.5414
4	2.9303	2.3897
5 = Very often	3.0294	2.8333
Total sample mean	**2.8044**	**2.4423**

One interesting detail is that the baseline value of the right-wing extremism index is relatively high (above 2.6) for TikTok abstainers, whereas for social media abstainers on other platforms it is significantly lower (around 2.2). This likely reflects differences in the user base – for example, older or already politically right-leaning individuals might avoid TikTok while still holding far-right attitudes. Despite this potential preselection, TikTok users show an increase in propensity to agree with right-wing statements with a growing dose of AfD content. Moreover, similarly to AfD sympathy, the highest index levels are found among those who very often consume AfD content outside of TikTok (average ~2.83). This group might, for instance, actively seek far-right content on platforms like Telegram, relevant forums, or channels, which is associated with particularly high patterns of far-right attitudes. Overall, the findings reinforce that frequent exposure to AfD-related information in social media correlates with higher agreement with far-right statements.

6   Discussion and Interpretation

The findings of this study indicate an empirically robust link between social media use and far-right tendencies among young people in Germany. With increasing intensity of social media use, average agreement with far-right statements rises, as does sympathy for far-right parties. This is a linear relationship with a substantial gap between non-users and heavy users – suggesting that social media use is a significant factor with broad impact in the context of political radicalization. This pattern aligns with earlier research showing that social media can shape political orientations, but the present findings refine this perspective by demonstrating that these effects are not uniform. Rather than a general influence of social media use, the results highlight platform-specific dynamics, thereby extending existing work and underscoring that digital environments differ substantially in their potential to support far-right attitudes. The key factor is not just that social media are used, but which platforms are used and how intensively. Particularly high far-right orientation scores are found among heavy users of ideologically homogeneous and weakly moderated networks – such as Telegram, imageboards, or Gettr. These platforms can be understood as digital echo chambers that, through technical structures (e.g. lack of journalistic gatekeeping, algorithmic amplification of emotional content, group functions with closed milieus) and sociocultural conditions (e.g. affinity for conspiracy narratives, alternative interpretive frameworks), contribute to the stabilization and intensification of far-right attitudes.

It is also notable that large platforms with broad public visibility like YouTube, Instagram, or WhatsApp show relatively small or no significant correlations with far-right orientation – even with intensive use. These differences persist even when key sociodemographic factors are controlled. This argues against a purely selection-based interpretation and points toward genuine platform effects: some networks create or reinforce an environment in which far-right worldviews thrive better, while other digital environments tend to exert a more normative regulating influence.

The role of TikTok warrants special consideration: here too a positive relationship between intensive use and far-right orientations is evident, but it is moderate and significantly weaker than, for example, on Telegram or Facebook. The frequently asserted special role of TikTok as a driver of far-right radicalization among young people is not supported by the present data when considering average attitude scores.

Heavy TikTok users differ only minimally in their attitudes from other user groups. Rather, despite algorithmic personalization and some problematic content, the platform does not appear to serve as an ideological retreat or mobilization space to the same extent as smaller, more ideologically homogeneous networks with lower visibility and even less regulation. At the same time, given TikTok's high reach among young people, even comparatively moderate associations can translate into a considerable absolute number of users who are exposed to, and potentially mobilized by, far-right content. In this sense, TikTok may still constitute a central element of the digital opportunity structure for far-right actors – not because it produces the highest individual risk levels, but because it combines relevant effects with a particularly large youth audience. This finding urges analytical caution against media moral panics: not every new social medium is inherently a uniquely powerful accelerant of radicalization, yet platforms with broad youth reach remain highly relevant when assessing the overall mobilization potential of far-right communication.

The comparatively moderate association observed for TikTok may at first appear inconsistent with content-analytic research showing that the platform hosts substantial amounts of extremist, hateful, or politically polarizing material. This discrepancy highlights an important distinction: the availability of extreme content does not necessarily translate directly into measurable shifts in the average user's attitudes. Algorithmic exposure varies considerably across users, and only a minority appears to enter pathways where harmful content becomes systematically amplified. Moreover, large mainstream platforms with broad audiences tend to dilute such effects at the aggregate level because most users primarily consume non-political or entertainment-oriented material. In this sense, the present findings align with the idea that TikTok can simultaneously host significant volumes of extremist content and yet produce only moderate average attitudinal effects – while still potentially exerting substantial influence on specific, more vulnerable subgroups.

The results suggest that social media should not be understood as a monolithic influence factor, but rather as a dynamic, multidimensional field fueled by technical architecture, communicative practice, and social composition. For theory development, this implies the need to intertwine classic assumptions of media effects research with platform-specific characteristics.

For the sake of methodological transparency, it must be emphasized that the relationships reported here are correlational. Due to the cross-sectional design, the direction of the association cannot be determined: it remains unclear whether the use of certain platforms leads to more far-right attitudes, whether users with pre-existing far-right orientations are more likely to seek out certain platforms, or whether both outcomes are shaped by unmeasured factors. To identify causalities, longitudinal studies are necessary. Furthermore, the measurement of far-right attitudes in this study focuses more on classical ideological dimensions such as ethnonationalism, xenophobia, authoritarianism and antisemitic stereotypes. While these components represent well-established foundations of far-right ideology, the scale does not capture more contemporary online-specific facets. These include for example antifeminist and anti-LGBTQ narratives, conspiracy beliefs or distinct digital subcultural facets. Therefore, the present study may even underestimate the association between platform use and far-right orientations, and future research should incorporate these additional dimensions.

A number of influential predictors of extremist attitudes identified in the literature – such as socioeconomic deprivation, perceived discrimination, or broader psychosocial stressors – could not be captured in the present study. As a result, the analyses cannot account for these variables, and unobserved heterogeneity may partly shape the estimated associations. This means that some of the observed platform effects may reflect underlying factors for which the data do not provide direct measures. Recognising these constraints is essential: the findings indicate robust correlations under the available controls, yet the possibility of omitted variable bias remains and should be addressed in future studies through more comprehensive measurement models. Moreover, the data collection relies on self-reported platform use. The question of whether political content was consciously sought, passively consumed, or algorithmically delivered remains open. Similarly, it is unclear what role individual media literacy or counter-publics (e.g. counter-speech, memes, or satire) play. The measured platform effects therefore reflect more average contextual effects rather than individual reception trajectories. In addition, the sample is limited to young people between 17 and 26 years old; in other age groups the relationships might differ significantly. Finally yet importantly, the extremely high

values on some niche platforms (imageboards, Gettr) must be interpreted with methodological caution. The number of users there in the sample is relatively small.

The use of social media platforms has politically non-neutral consequences; comparisons between platforms reveal effects that vary in direction and strength. Some platforms, for example Facebook and Telegram, act as particularly strong amplifiers for far-right attitudes, whereas the much-discussed platform TikTok shows rather below-average values. A nuanced consideration of digital platforms therefore seems indispensable – both for research on political attitudes and for strategies to counter radicalization in digital spaces.

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