Muslim TikTok in Germany

A Community Navigating Religion, Racism, and Radicalization in the Digital Age

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Inaugural dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree Doctor of Social Sciences in the Graduate School of Economic and Social Sciences at the University of Mannheim

Muslim TikTok in Germany
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Date of oral defense	May 6th, 2025

To my parents

Acknowledgements

"O Kumayl, know that knowledge is surely preferred to wealth. You are guarded by knowledge, but you have to guard wealth."

Imam Ali

Although working on this dissertation often felt Sisyphean, like pushing a boulder uphill only to start over each day, I was never truly alone in this endeavor. I was fortunate to be surrounded by people who provided guidance, support, and encouragement, both academically and beyond.

First and foremost, I would like to express my gratitude to Frank Kalter and Naika Foroutan for giving me this opportunity and for the tremendous trust they placed in me. It was through their advice that I found my way on this path.

On the academic side, I would like to thank my co-authors and colleagues, especially Fatima El Sayed and Özgür Özvatan, who are not only brilliant collaborators but have been supportive throughout our joint projects. I have also benefited greatly from the valuable insights and constructive feedback of my CDSS cohort–please accept my sincere thanks. A special mention goes to Florian Keusch, whose advice has been instrumental in shaping important decisions in my research.

Most importantly, I would like to thank my parents. My father, Ali, instilled in me an insatiable curiosity and a deep love of knowledge, qualities that have guided me along this path. His intellectual depth and wisdom remain an inspiration to which I can only aspire.

Most of all, I owe infinite gratitude to my mother Zahra, whose lifelong efforts and unwavering support–far beyond the years of this Ph.D.–have lifted the weight of this boulder from my shoulders on a daily basis. Without you, none of this would have been possible. In truth, your dedication and care have outweighed the actual work I have put into this dissertation. If anyone earned this Ph.D., it is you.

Mannheim, February 6, 2025

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Introduction

General Introduction

The advent of the Internet and its proliferation over the past three decades has been one of the most transformative processes of our time. Not only has it facilitated technological progress, but it has also profoundly reshaped the world's social fabric. The Internet's capabilities are often associated with positive attributes, such as affordable communication worldwide (Kwak et al., 2006; Vertovec, 2004; Wilding, 2006). It has revolutionized social interaction through social media platforms and messaging applications and catalyzed political mobilization. Movements such as Occupy Wall Street (Conover et al., 2013; Theocharis et al., 2014), the Arab Spring (Aouragh and Alexander, 2011), and more recent ones such as #MeToo (Armstrong and Mahone, 2023; Hassan, Mandal, et al., 2019) and Black Lives Matter (BLM) (Carney, 2016; Eriksson Krutrök and Åkerlund, 2023), which found their base or mobilization in Internet-based organizing, are examples of this transformative potential. In addition, the gig economy has been enabled by internet-based platforms (Frank et al., 2019; Vallas and Schor, 2020), and innovations such as cryptocurrencies signal ongoing socio-economic transformations.

At the dawn of this millennium, the initial enthusiasm for the Internet's inherent democratic potential was palpable. Prominent voices such as then US Vice President Al Gore hailed its promise:

> "The Global Information Infrastructure [GII] will not only be a metaphor for a functioning democracy, it will in fact promote the functioning of democracy by greatly enhancing the participation of citizens in decision-making. And it will greatly promote the ability of nations to cooperate with each other. I see a new Athenian Age of democracy forged in the fora the GII will create." (Gore, 1994, cited in Coleman and Blumler, 2009, p. 8)

Yet in the decades since, much disillusionment has set in. Contrary developments have tempered that optimism, revealing the limitations and challenges of this digital revolution. One of the harshest realities has been the widening of the digital divide, where unequal access to digital technologies has reproduced existing socio-economic inequalities rather than reducing them (Dimaggio et al., 2004; Nguyen et al., 2021; Shaw et al., 2023).

Moreover, the promise of the Internet as a free and open space for communication beyond societal constraints has been overshadowed by concerns about its darker undercurrents. These range from fears about antisocial behavior and mental health issues associated with Internet use (Hofer and Hargittai, 2024; Kraut et al., 1998; Shklovski et al., 2006), the rise of online hate speech, cyberbullying (Boyd, 2014; Lowry et al., 2016; Massanari, 2017), the facilitation of a new criminal economy through the dark web (Kaur and Randhawa, 2020), to more recent concerns about the use and abuse of artificial intelligence and its profound impact on society (Krupiy, 2020; Vesnic-Alujevic et al., 2020). These developments underscore a growing skepticism about the Internet's role in promoting social progress and challenge the utopian vision once heralded at the onset of the digital age.

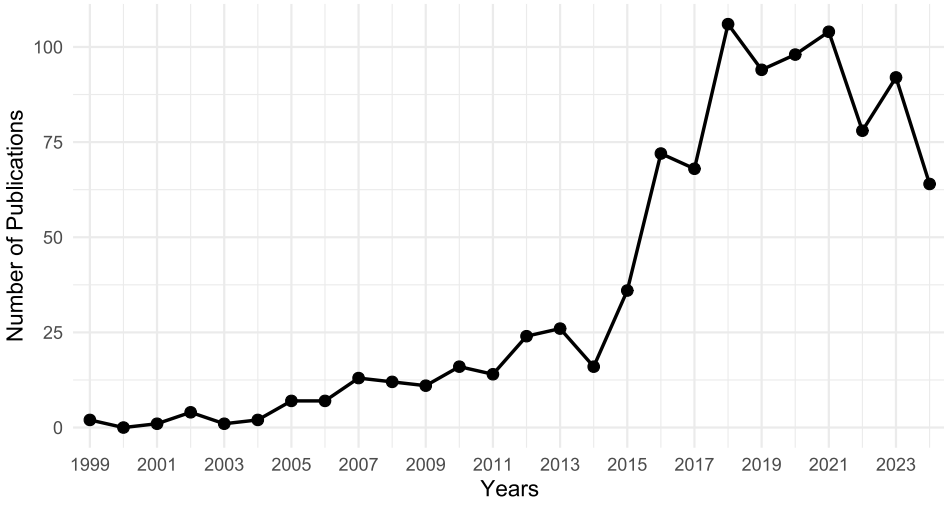
In the social sciences, particularly in radicalization research, criminology, and security studies, the Internet has become a central object of study over the past two decades. A notable example is the 1999 Columbine High School massacre, which sparked widespread debate about the possible factors contributing to such acts. Discussions ranged from mental health and social alienation to cultural influences such as music (e.g., Marilyn Manson) and video games (Larkin, 2007). Among these factors, the Internet was raised as a possible facilitator, specifically the exposure to violent content (Cherkis, 2017). The Columbine shootings have been described as the "first mass shooting of the internet age" and after the shootings, "a fandom for the shooters emerged on a fledgling internet, and it has only grown in the decades since" (Peterson and Densley, 2021, p. 98, cited in Peterson, Densley, et al., 2023, p. 2). This tragic event marked a turning point, positioning the Internet as both a breeding ground for radicalization and a critical object of study. It has become particularly relevant in examining the radicalization of young, lone actor domestic terrorists and mass shooters, often white, associated with the emergence of online communities such as the "incel movement" (Hoffman et al., 2020).

The dawn of online radicalization and related research and securitization efforts began to take shape around this time, further catalyzed by the events of 9/11 and the subsequent global focus on "Islamism" and "Islamic terrorism" in the "war on terror" (Kundnani, 2014; Kundnani, 2012). The discourse on online extremism and radicalization became closely intertwined with the construction of "Islamism" as a central object of security interest. A key reason for this was the use of the Internet by groups such as al-Qaeda to disseminate propaganda, recruit members, and coordinate activities (Holtmann, 2010; Rudner, 2017). The very qualities that make the Internet a free and open platform for creating and sharing content with a global audience became instrumental for extremist groups to advance their agendas. Much like other societal domains that migrated online–with social media being likened to modern-day town halls–extremist actors found the Internet to be a viable medium for propaganda, organization, and recruitment (Caiani and Parenti, 2013; Janbek and Williams, 2014). This dynamic was particularly evident during the armed conflicts in Syria and Iraq, at its height around 2014, when the so-called "Islamic State" (IS) relied heavily on social media and communication platforms. IS orchestrated

a sophisticated propaganda campaign, produced high-quality audiovisual content, and maintained a presence in various digital domains, including social media, messaging, and gaming platforms (Awan, 2017; Berger and Morgan, 2015; Bloom et al., 2019; Farwell, 2014; Al-Rawi, 2018). This campaign, which was integral for worldwide recruitment, marked a critical period of heightened attention to the role of the Internet in global security concerns.

These two key periods-the turn of the millennium, which initiated discussions on the intersection of information and communication technology (ICT) and "Islamic terrorism," and the surge of academic interest following the Syrian and Iraqi conflicts-are well represented in research. Figure i.1 highlights this trajectory, with one of the earliest reflections on ICT and terrorism appearing in 1999 (see Whine, 1999a,b) and a significant increase in academic discourse on the topic after 2014.

Figure i.1. Scopus publications relating to Islam, online platforms, and radicalism by year



A recurring theme in extremist propaganda, particularly online, is the highlighting of grievances faced by Muslims in Western societies (Baugut and Neumann, 2019; Hotait and Ali, 2024; Mahood and Rane, 2017). This includes not only criticism of Western interventions in the Middle East and other predominantly Muslim regions, but also narratives that address social exclusion, injustice, and racism experienced by Muslims in the West. Importantly, such grievances are not mere fabrications of extremist propagandists; rather,

they reflect the lived realities of discrimination and marginalization faced by Muslim communities in Western countries, including Germany (CLAIM, 2024; Di Stasio et al., 2021; Lewicki and Shooman, 2020; Unabhängiger Expertenkreis Muslimfeindlichkeit, 2023). Simultaneously, perceived and experienced in-group injustice and discrimination are repeatedly mentioned as psychosocial risk factors for radicalization (Campelo et al., 2018; Emmelkamp et al., 2020). These experiences are often rooted in the securitization of Muslims as a "suspect" community, a consequence of the post-9/11 "war on terror" discourse (Kundnani, 2014; Kundnani, 2012) which is also reflected in German society (Andersen and Mayerl, 2018; Attia et al., 2021; Halm, 2013). Ironically, the very security measures and narratives aimed at countering terrorism have to some extent alienated and marginalized Muslim communities, creating fertile ground for extremist groups to exploit these vulnerabilities for propaganda purposes. This renders the security discourse surrounding Muslims in the West not merely tainted by racist and discriminatory practices but, considering its genealogy, inherently a function of them. Evidence suggests that exposure to negative, securitized representations of Muslims as threats has a negative impact on how Muslims perceive their relationship with non-Muslims, in this case, German society. (Neumann et al., 2018).

The interplay between the increased visibility of Muslims in security debates, extending to migration and domestic surveillance (Schiffauer, 2006; Wigger, 2019), and their marginalization in terms of representation and inequality has created a challenging dynamic. While Muslims are often portrayed as security threats, they often feel misrepresented or invisible in broader public discourses. This duality has motivated many Muslims around the world to use the Internet as a space for self-expression, visibility, and community building (Bahfen, 2018; El Sayed and Hotait, 2024; Pennington, 2018b; Piela, 2012; Rozehnal, 2022). Social media platforms in particular have enabled Muslims to engage in political, social, and religious exchanges, as well as more mundane pursuits such as sharing content about food, beauty, and lifestyle (Bunt, 2018; El Sayed and Hotait, 2024; Karakavak and Özbölük, 2022; Nisa, 2021; Törnberg and Törnberg, 2016). The Internet has provided a seemingly unrestricted and democratic space for self-determination. In this sense, this space has proven to be a double-edged sword. It also exposes users to extremist actors who use these platforms for recruitment and propaganda. However, it has also provided opportunities for empowerment and advocacy, fostering positive representation and community building. Indeed, it is the same space that facilitates political activism against anti-Muslim racism, including the securitization of Muslims (Aydin, 2023; Civila et al., 2023; Downing and Dron, 2022).

This dynamic is particularly evident in the experiences of Muslim women in the West, who often face intersectional marginalization as women, as Muslims-often visibly marked by the hijab, and as individuals with a migration background (Fernández-Reino et al., 2023; Perry, 2014; Zempi, 2020). These intersecting forms of discrimination position them at the juncture of mainstream non-Muslim societal constraints and cultural expectations

and marginalization within their own communities (Bullock, 2005; Durrani, 2021; El Sayed, 2023; Povey, 2009). Social media platforms have emerged as alternative spaces where these women can navigate these intersecting challenges. Through these platforms, they not only share personal experiences but also engage in critical discussions about religious norms and cultural practices (Akou, 2010; Pennington, 2018b; Piela, 2010, 2012). Moreover, they use the potential of social media to engage in political activism with the mainstream and their own community, fostering a form of empowerment that bridges their dual position in society (Hirji, 2021; Islam, 2019, 2023; Khamis, 2022; Pennington, 2018a).

The short-video platform TikTok is an example of this duality. While it facilitates representation, community building, and creating counter-narratives for marginalized groups (Civila et al., 2023; El Sayed and Hotait, 2024; Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded, 2022), it has also become a venue for extremist actors to target vulnerable audiences (Hartwig, Seelig, et al., 2023; Hohner et al., 2024; Hotait and Ali, 2024). TikTok's algorithm-driven "For You" page, which recommends content based on user activity, has been criticized for potentially exposing users to extremist, violent, and otherwise radicalizing content (Keith, 2021; Little and Richards, 2021; Shin and Jitkajornwanich, 2024). In 2021, the then Chairman of the US Senate Homeland Security Committee asked TikTok about its policy on extremist content (Stracqualursi and Wild, 2021). Among other things, concerns about extremism have been one of the alleged key reasons for summoning TikTok's CEO to testify before the U.S. Senate on several occasions (Perrett and Davis, 2025).At the time of writing, the platform's parent company, ByteDance, faced a potential forced divestiture under the Protecting Americans from Foreign Adversary Controlled Applications Act (2024), which would have banned TikTok in the U.S. if compliance was not achieved. However, the measure was not further implemented due to assurances from former President Donald Trump about finding a solution. The primary concerns cited are the alleged influence of the Chinese Communist Party over ByteDance and the potential use of the application to manipulate user behavior in alignment with Chinese interests (Committee on Energy and Commerce, 2024). Similarly, the European Commission has opened formal proceedings against TikTok for possible violations of the Digital Services Act, citing concerns about "rabbit holes" and the risk of radicalization processes (European Commission, 2024).

In Germany, the discourse surrounding TikTok and radicalization has received considerable attention, particularly in relation to German Muslims (Köll, 2024; Meyer et al., 2024; Rascho, 2024). Numerous documentaries and news reports have focused on this issue in recent years. However, these reports often rely on expert opinion and anecdotal accounts rather than robust empirical evidence, which does not help to disentangle how much of it is factual and how much is indicative of a moral panic. This disproportionate focus on German Muslims has intensified debates about the role of social media platforms in facilitating radicalization, while also highlighting the broader societal challenges posed

by anti-Muslim racism in the context of (digital) security discussions about Muslims.

Despite the social, geopolitical, and regulatory dimensions of the TikTok debate, concerns about its potential role in radicalization are not entirely unfounded. Several factors make TikTok particularly relevant for scrutiny. First, it has amassed over one billion users in just a few years, making it one of the most widely used social media platforms in the world (Pappas, 2021). Second, as mentioned above, existing studies have documented the presence of radical and extremist content on the platform, raising questions about the mechanisms by which such content reaches users. For example, patterns of user activity and engagement may lead to algorithmic recommendations of problematic material, as various studies and self-experiments have shown (Hotait, 2022; Little and Richards, 2021; Shin and Jitkajornwanich, 2024). While the causal relationship between exposure to extremist online media and radicalization remains present but contested (Hassan, Brouillette-Alarie, et al., 2018), the potential for such a mechanism for TikTok specifically remains elusive. Third, TikTok's user base is predominantly young (Bestvater, 2024; Koch, 2023), a demographic in which the adoption of extremist attitudes or tendencies toward radicalization has been observed to occur more frequently than in older age groups (Acevedo and Chaudhary, 2015; Ellis et al., 2021). This combination of a large, young, engaged audience, algorithm-driven content recommendations, and a vulnerable demographic makes TikTok a critical platform for studying the intersection of social media, community representation, and radicalization.

Despite the explosive combination of factors surrounding TikTok's social relevance, research on its potential to facilitate radicalization remains limited. Recently, academic attention to the connection between the platform and radicalization in Germany, particularly among German Muslims, seems to have increased but remains sparse. Germany, which has one of the largest Muslim populations in Europe, is a particularly interesting case, not least because of its dynamic migration history. The Muslim population includes long-established communities, such as third-generation Turkish Muslims, as well as more recently arrived immigrants, including Syrian refugees, most of whom arrived around 2015. This diversity and the young age of Muslims in Germany, with 43% under the age of 24 (Pfündel et al., 2021), combined with the prevalence of anti-Muslim racism and discrimination in Germany, reveals an unexplored cultural complexity and potential propensity for radicalization associated with TikTok use among German Muslims, underscoring the need for further research.

While some studies have explored extremism in German Muslim TikTok, including how anti-Muslim racism and discrimination are exploited by specific actors, the existing body of work tends to focus on individual account analysis or monitoring projects (e.g. Hartwig and Hänig, 2022; Hartwig, Seelig, et al., 2023). Publicly available, systematic, and comprehensive research on the various narratives produced by German Muslims on TikTok is lacking. Questions about how German Muslims engage with issues of religion, society, and politics on the platform, as well as the broader implications of this engagement,

continue to be underexplored. Even less attention has been paid to the positive and emancipatory uses of TikTok by German Muslims outside of the extremism paradigm. Understanding these uses is crucial not only for assessing the digital representation of German Muslims but also for assessing how their activities foster advocacy and activism that is not rooted in extremism.

It would introduce a significant bias to ignore the full range of content production and consumption within a given community, particularly in discussions of radicalization. Such a bias risks overlooking potentially positive, empowering, and preventative content on TikTok by assuming that exposure and influence only occur through negative content. This implicit assumption has traditionally shaped public debates about TikTok, failing to account for the platform's diverse range of content or to critically examine the actual impact it may have on its audience. If exposure to extremist content can promote radicalization, it would logically follow that exposure to positive and inclusive content could have the opposite effect. What both the public and academia seem to have overlooked is highly relevant within the community of practitioners focused on preventing and countering violent extremism (P/CVE). Their work, exemplified by initiatives such as online streetwork or content creation efforts, is based on the expectation and experience that positive encounters–such as counter-speech, dialogue, and constructive content consumption–serve as effective antagonists to negative and extremist content (see Ali and Reicher, 2020; Ashour, 2010; Stuiber, 2019; Williams, 2020).

Thus, there remains a critical research gap regarding the content produced by German Muslims on TikTok and its impact on users. Major questions remain unanswered: What content do German Muslims produce on TikTok, and how does this content lead to radicalization or not? Against this backdrop, this dissertation examines the representation of German Muslims on TikTok and the consequences of this representation. The fundamental research questions that guide this study are:

RQ 1 What topics and issues do German Muslims address in their TikTok content?

RQ 2 How does this content relate to religion, (anti-Muslim) grievances, and radical ideologies?

RQ 3 How does the consumption of this content affect the values and attitudes of German Muslim TikTok users? Does it promote radicalization and/or act as a preventive force?

A central and guiding theme of this thesis is the complex interplay between racism, discrimination, and the digital representation of German Muslims on TikTok. It explores how these challenges simultaneously act as catalysts for positive activism and sources of vulnerability. By examining the unique dynamics of TikTok–including its distinctive logic of content creation, virality, and consumption–this thesis examines how these

factors influence the experiences and activities of Muslim users. Using a multifaceted analytical approach, the studies presented provide a comprehensive examination of the implications of these dynamics for Muslims in Germany, while also considering their broader implications for the digital media landscape. In this endeavor, the studies adopt various analytical perspectives, including:

- Examining both positive and negative representations of Muslims on the platform.
- Integrating qualitative-hermeneutical and quantitative methodologies for a comprehensive analysis.
- Investigating the content production and consumption side of TikTok.
- Applying gendered approaches to compare and highlight the experiences of male and, particularly, female Muslim TikTok users.

This dissertation seeks to address the identified research gaps by outlining a theoretical and empirical framework within which online radicalization can be conceptualized and where research gaps can be identified (Theoretical Framework and Research Gap). The introduction continues with an empirical strategy and chapter guide (Chapter Guide and Empirical Approach), detailing the methodological approach used to answer the research questions and contribute to filling these gaps. This section also provides an overview of the three empirical chapters, highlighting their contributions to the overarching research objectives. Each of the three empirical chapters explores a different aspect of the dissertation's central questions, and together they provide a comprehensive understanding of how TikTok shapes the experiences and representations of German Muslims and how they relate to radicalization. Following these empirical investigations, the general discussion synthesizes the findings to answer the fundamental research questions (Chapter Summaries) and reflect on their broader socio-political and scientific implications (General Discussion and Outlook). Avenues and imperatives for future research are identified and discussed.

Theoretical Framework and Research Gap

Like many concepts in the social sciences, radicalization lacks a universally accepted definition. On the contrary, the term is highly contested and subject to different interpretations. Not surprisingly, Sedgwick (2010) coined the concept of radicalization as a "source of confusion" and lays out how it is very much subject to different agendas. From a state security perspective, radicalization commonly refers to ideologies and actions that violate laws and constitutional principles. Specifically, some prominent definitions locate radicalization in the "readiness to engage in illegal and violent political action" (Moskalenko

and McCauley, 2009, p. 240). Yet others argue that "to be a radical is to reject the status quo, but not necessarily in a violent or even problematic manner. Some radicals conduct, support, or encourage terrorism, whilst many others do no such thing, and actively and often effectively agitate against it" (Bartlet and Miller, 2012, p. 2). Hence, other scholars describe radicalism as "advocating sweeping political change, based on a conviction that the status quo is unacceptable while at the same time a fundamentally different alternative appears to be available to the radical" (Schmid, 2013, p. 8). Therefore, an approach to synthesis can be found by Beelmann (2020, p. 2), who describes it as the adaptation of attitudes and behaviors that constitute "a significant deviation [...] from basic legal and political norms and values within a social system (society or state) that seek their (at least partial) abolition and replacement". This deviation does not necessarily have to involve violence or even be inherently problematic when considering reformist movements. Such an approach may be difficult to put into practice, though, because it would classify "90% of the population of the Arab world as radical, since 90% of the population of the Arab world wants radical change in the existing social, cultural, and political structures there" (Sedgwick, 2010, pp. 482–483). Sedgwick (2010, p. 491) offers a pragmatic strategy to the problem of conceptualizing radicalization:

> "Under these circumstances, the best solution for researchers is probably to abandon the idea that 'radical' or 'radicalization' are absolute concepts, to recognize the essentially relative nature of the term 'radical,' and to be careful always to specify both the continuum being referred to and the location of what is seen as 'moderate' on that continuum. Researchers also need to be aware of the sometimes very politicized integration agenda in many Western European countries, both with regard to that agenda's impact on definitions of radicalism, and with regard to that agenda's possible impact on Muslim populations in Western Europe"

Therefore, I argue that the general concept of radicalization should be understood as a form of deviance in a broad sense. One, that does not have to be necessarily objectionable. However, the research context and object should dictate the necessity of specifying or integrating different dimensions and spectrums of radicalization, tailoring a working definition to the specific case or context under study, while striving to maintain a general openness, pragmatism, and relational approach, and recognizing the multiplicity of the concept.

Radicalization as such is a complex, multifaceted, and sustained process shaped by a constellation of societal, social, psychological, biographical, and individual contexts and vulnerabilities (Beelmann, 2020). As a result, it is studied from a variety of disciplinary perspectives, each of which offers unique insights. In order to contextualize the research gap addressed in this dissertation, it is essential to reconstruct a general theoretical model

of factors that determine radicalization in both offline and online contexts, specifically on TikTok. This allows for the identification of persistent gaps and the role of the research questions and empirical findings of this dissertation in addressing them.

The first layer of this model assumes that individuals possess certain characteristics and are embedded in social contexts that make them more or less likely to become radicalized. From a psychological perspective, these are often referred to as "risk factors". These risk factors can generally be divided into three groups (Beelmann, 2020; Campelo et al., 2018):

- Individual risk factors, including deficits in social-cognitive information processing (e.g., impaired moral development, reduced empathy, and low self-control), early antisocial tendencies, and problematic personality traits such as unstable self-esteem, narcissism, and authoritarianism. Mental health problems, including mood disorders, addiction, obsessive-compulsive disorder, and suicidal tendencies, also play a role. In addition, feelings and experiences of social exclusion, low social acceptance, and personal insecurity or instability contribute to individual vulnerability.

- Micro-environmental or social factors, such as family conflict, lack of positive, values-based education, parental prejudice, and fragile or dysfunctional family structures. Other significant factors include the presence of deviant or criminal peer groups without access to constructive alternatives, experiences of group-based discrimination, limited opportunities for meaningful interactions with diverse social groups, and exposure to violence either within deviant groups or within the family. In addition, friendships or admiration for members of radical groups reinforce these dynamics.

- Macro-environmental or societal factors, which include real or perceived intergroup conflicts, such as resource disputes or wars, and perceived threats to one's group. The prevalence of ideologies that legitimize violence, growing social injustice and inequality, collective marginalization, and social disintegration are also influential. In addition, rapid social change, societal polarization, and broader geopolitical contexts exacerbate these risk factors.

Among the individual risk factors, demographic variables such as age and gender also play a role. Research suggests that younger individuals, especially adolescents, and female gender are more strongly associated with susceptibility to radicalization (Campelo et al., 2018; Emmelkamp et al., 2020; McGilloway et al., 2015). Adolescence is described by Campelo et al. (2018, p. 8) as a "phase of turbulence and reorganisation. For some adolescents, the inherent detachment from primary care givers and finding one's own identity bring a loss of security and sometimes a fear of loneliness and of being abandoned. Belonging

to a radical community conveys a sense of belonging, a sense of meaning and comfort". The consistent emphasis on grievances, both individual and societal, as risk factors for radicalization is matched by several theories that substantiate this as a causal relationship.

These theories include the significance quest theory, which posits that social exclusion leads to a deprivation of personal significance, which in turn drives people to seek to regain a sense of meaning–for example, by joining with others against those they perceive as responsible for their marginalization (Kruglanski, Molinario, et al., 2022). Another theory is anomie theory, which suggests that a perceived separation from social norms and values due to exclusion from society decreases the sense of responsibility to those norms and increases the likelihood of acting against them (Bayat, 2007; Ionescu et al., 2021; Ravn et al., 2019. In addition, strain theory explains how structural barriers create discrepancies between aspirational goals and the means to achieve them. The resulting strain can lead individuals to take extreme measures against those who perpetuate these barriers (Agnew, 2010).

However, as McGilloway et al. (2015) note, there are cases where seemingly "well-integrated" and "normal" individuals follow the path to radicalization. Risk factors alone do not necessarily lead to radicalization; the adoption of radical ideologies or narratives is a critical component that channels these risk factors into radical values, actions, and group affiliations (Kruglanski and Webber, 2014). Central to radical ideologies is the identification of "a grievance, a culprit, and a method" (Kruglanski and Webber, 2014, p. 382):

> "The first step is the identification of a grievance, that is, an injustice or harm that has been suffered by the group. Once the grievance has been identified, the ideology blames an outgroup as responsible for perpetrating the aforementioned grievance. And finally, the ideology must provide a solution to this problem; it must identify a morally warranted and effective method for cleansing one's group from this dishonor"

Integrating the role of risk factors and ideology, the radicalization process often involves a combination of individual, social, or societal risks that are galvanized and directed toward radicalism by ideology. Before the Internet era, the spread of radical ideology relied on analog means; however, as discussed in the General Introduction, online platforms have increasingly taken on this role. Evidence suggests that exposure to extremist material online can facilitate radicalization (Hassan, Brouillette-Alarie, et al., 2018), with information provision identified as one of the key mechanisms through which online radicalization can occur (Mølmen and Ravndal, 2021). Nevertheless, it would be reductive to conclude that platforms like TikTok inherently cause radicalization simply because they host radical content and the consumption of that content might radicalize.

This is because, first and foremost, there is an intermediary between the user and potentially radicalizing content: the recommendation algorithm. Recommendation algorithms or systems are designed to "generate meaningful recommendations to a collection of users for items or products that might interest them" (Melville and Sindhwani, 2017, p. 829). For social media platforms like TikTok, this means algorithms that suggest content tailored to users' interests. TikTok's "For You" page, the platform's primary interface, curates recommendations based on factors such as user interactions (e.g., likes, shares, and comments), followed accounts, posted content, video information (e.g., captions, sounds, hashtags), and device and account settings (e.g., language preferences, country settings, device type), as outlined by TikTok (2020).

Essentially, the algorithm uses a combination of behavioral data and technical parameters to predict user preferences and suggest content accordingly. As such, it acts as a mediator between the presence of and exposure to radical content on TikTok. The potential for radicalization on TikTok remains elusive unless measured empirically, specifically whether users are exposed to potentially radicalizing content through algorithmic suggestions. Furthermore, given the "no causation without manipulation" principle, understanding whether or not an effect actually unfolds on users under variation of exposure to radical content in the algorithmic context of TikTok is essential to assessing the platform's role in radicalization.

Concerning measuring the effect of content exposure, the reality for researchers is that radicalization studies are often silent on the specific mechanism linking content consumption to radicalization. From a sociological perspective, the question arises: why and how is online media persuasive? This seemingly trivial question, often an unquestioned assumption in radicalization research–that content influences sociopolitical attitudes through mere consumption–is actually fundamental. Why would the consumption of content persuade someone to become radicalized, and in the case of TikTok, how would this manifest itself? Just as ideological narratives are essential to the radicalization process, the persuasive power of narratives emerges as the key to answering these critical questions.

Relevant to the persuasiveness of media narratives is the "extent to which a recipient finds the narrative or characters engrossing" (Slater et al., 2006, p. 238). A central mechanism facilitating influence on attitudes and behaviors is the "perceived similarity between message recipients and key characters portrayed in the message" (Slater et al., 2006, p. 238). Perceived similarity is further divided into actual perceived similarity and empathy. While the former refers to perceived similarities as such, the empathy component refers to "sharing the emotions and experiences of a character in a narrative without necessarily perceiving oneself to be similar to that character; as such, it is also arguably more affective than similarity, which may be primarily cognitive" (Slater et al., 2006, p. 238). The power of stories to mobilize a recipient "lies in their ability to elicit empathy for the protagonist and, as a result, support for the larger cause" (Polletta and Redman, 2020, p. 4). In addition, there is a victim effect, whereby empathy and willingness to take action

on an issue are more likely when a narrative of victimization is present, especially when the victim of a particular issue is portrayed as not responsible for his or her own plight, but rather as a victim of external circumstances (Polletta and Redman, 2020).

As a result, perceived in-group grievances, injustices, marginalization, and discrimination become potent narrative elements. While perceived in-group grievances represent an individual or societal risk factor for radicalization, here they can be identified as the narrative component that helps make videos persuasive precisely because they relate to the identity and grievances of those consuming the content. Projected onto German Muslims, this means that issues affecting this group, such as exclusion, marginalization, and the like, become sources of both perceived similarity and elicitation of empathy because the viewer is part of the affected group. This shared identity and experience of grievance can create a strong connection between the content and its audience, potentially increasing the persuasive power of the narrative.

However, this relationship is not exclusive to potentially radicalizing videos. Grievances are identified as affective or cognitive door openers to support certain actors, ideas, and behaviors. These may be extreme or not at all - potentially even positive, empowering, or preventative. It is precisely in this dynamic that a persistent research gap lies. First, we currently lack comprehensive knowledge about the content production of German Muslim TikTokers that would allow us to reconstruct the narratives shared on this platform. Only then can we understand how they relate to their target audience and what role grievances play. Second, research in general, and radicalization research in particular, has almost completely ignored videos produced and consumed that are not extreme or positive. This is concerning because a large body of literature suggests that people who are exposed to a diversity of ideas and values tend to be less dogmatic and therefore more tolerant of others and less prone to extremist thought (Hunsberger et al., 1994; Kruglanski, 2004). In their influential paper, Dubois and Blank (2018) examine echo chambers–spaces that reinforce pre-existing attitudes and opinions–and partisan segregation, concluding that diverse media diets are associated with avoiding echo chambers. Thus, by consuming more than one form of media and different content within them, most people are not at risk of being trapped in a bubble of same-content exposure to one political orientation. Hypothesizing from the background of identity-uncertainty theory (Hogg, 2004, 2007), one could, of course, argue the other way around, that the confrontation with an increasingly complex world, values, and groups creates uncertainty in individuals, so that adopting totalistic identities or joining totalistic, extremist groups becomes a coping mechanism to reduce uncertainty and complexity.

TikTok hosts a wide variety of content, from positive to negative and everything in between. By design, TikTok is an entertainment-focused platform that follows its own logic of content production, consumption, interaction, and visibility (Abbasi et al., 2023; Abidin, 2020; Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Schellewald, 2023; Vaterlaus and Winter, 2021). Users voluntarily engage and interact with content, creating

an attention economy where content's appeal drives its success. Factors such as relatability, authenticity, humor, controversy, and even video length play a critical role in driving user engagement (Abbasi et al., 2023; Abidin, 2020; Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Barta, Belanche, et al., 2023; Guinaudeau et al., 2022; Zhao and Wagner, 2023). In addition, TikTok's focus on audiovisual content means that the use of sound, music, visual effects, and the overall video production itself has a significant impact on how engaging and watchable a video is (Cheng and Li, 2023; Ling et al., 2022; Schellewald, 2023).

Artistic elements, such as music and visuals, are not merely decorative, but play an active role in influencing emotions and behaviors. Research shows that art and music can convey content, evoke emotions, and even channel violent sentiments (Anderson et al., 2003). For example, both right-wing extremists (Shaffer, 2013) and groups such as the so-called Islamic State (Pieslak and Lahoud, 2020) have used music and art to support their propaganda. The technical capabilities of TikTok, which integrates audiovisual elements, make these artistic expressions highly relevant. How a video is presented–its protagonist, use of audiovisual elements, and overall appeal–becomes a key determinant of its engagement and impact. This, in turn, influences whether content is suggested by the algorithm, engaged with by users, and thus potentially internalized.

The dynamics of user engagement with content also tie back to the role of the recommendation algorithm as a mediator. The interplay between the algorithm suggesting content and user engagement with it–whether users perceive it as engaging or persuasive–represents a significant gap in current research. While evidence links content consumption to radicalization, there is a notable lack of studies examining TikTok specifically. To date, no comprehensive research has focused on German Muslims on TikTok, nor has experimental evidence been provided to explore whether exposure to radical content occurs on this platform and how it leads to radicalization. The algorithm's role in recommending such content, and how users interact with it, introduces a dynamic that complicates simplistic assumptions about TikTok's inherent potential to radicalize.

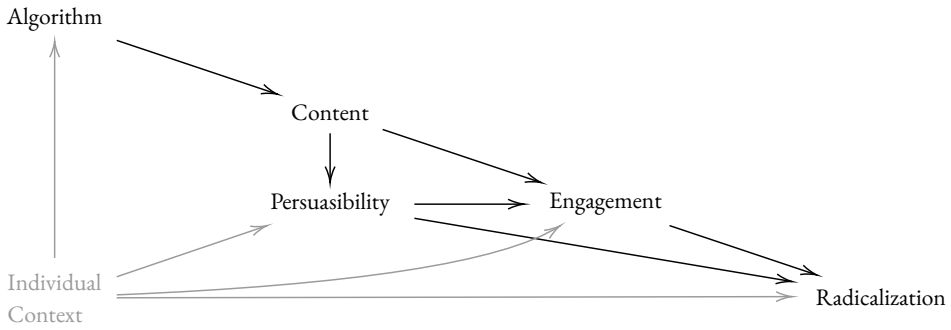
The issue of engagement with content also ties back to the role of the algorithm as a mediator. The interplay between content suggestions and user engagement–whether content is suggested, how it is then engaged with, and whether it fosters any narrative persuasion–represents a significant gap in existing research. While there is evidence linking online content consumption to radicalization, there are hardly any studies on TikTok and even fewer that focused on (German) Muslims, despite both the communities and the platform's specificities.

More specifically, there is a lack of experimental evidence on whether exposure occurs in the context of TikTok and how it might lead to radicalization, given that an algorithm suggests content and users deliberately engage with it. This engagement could include viewing the content in various ways, interacting with it or not, presenting a dynamic that complicates TikTok's potential to potentially radicalize users via recommendations and patterns of interaction on the platform. This research gap is particularly noteworthy given

the unique features of TikTok, including its algorithm-driven content delivery and the specific ways in which users interact with short-form video content. Understanding these dynamics is critical to assessing the platform's role in potential radicalization processes, particularly among specific demographic groups such as German Muslims.

The graphical representation of the previously detailed causal relationships for TikTok's potential role in (de)radicalization and, by extension, recommendation-based platforms, is shown in Figure i.2. In summary, TikTok's algorithm determines what content is suggested to users. This content entails its persuasiveness and engagement potential, both of which mediate whether the suggested content has the capacity to influence users toward radicalization. Given the dynamic nature of the algorithms, there is a kind of endogenous or feedback effect, where the engagement with the content naturally informs the algorithm in deeming content interesting to others. Underlying these processes are individual user characteristics and contexts, including demographic factors (e.g., age, gender), individual risk factors, and geographic or social contexts. These characteristics shape the algorithm through user behavior, such as interest in particular content, engagement patterns, and whether content is persuasive. The relationship between individual context and user behavior is substantiated by literature on the digital divide and fragmented use of social media along demographic and socioeconomic characteristics (Dimaggio et al., 2004; Hargittai and Hinnant, 2008; Hargittai and Walejko, 2008; Van Deursen and Van Dijk, 2014). The persuasiveness of the content, especially when linked to relatable grievances or shared experiences, plays a central role in determining the likelihood of radicalization.

Figure i.2. Theoretical model of TikTok radicalization



Chapter Guide and Empirical Approach

In short, the research gaps identified include a lack of comprehensive understanding of the narratives produced by German Muslim TikTok users and how they relate to extremism and empowerment. Furthermore, in the context of TikTok, the influence of the algorithm on exposure to such content, the nature of user engagement, and whether

this leads to radicalization remain underexplored. These gaps demonstrate the need for research that examines the interplay between narratives, algorithmic recommendations, user interactions, and individual risk factors.

The research questions guiding this dissertation aim to address the identified gaps in studying TikTok content produced and consumed by German Muslims. Research questions 1 and 2 focus on reconstructing and understanding the content, topics, and narratives produced by German Muslim TikTok users, as well as their ideological substance and relationship to grievances. These questions examine the production side of TikTok, specifically how marginalized groups use the platform to address personal, religious, and sociopolitical concerns. Research Question 3 examines the consumption side, specifically how TikTok users engage with and are influenced by such content. It considers whether TikTok's algorithmic exposure fosters radicalization or acts as a preventative force, exploring the dynamic interaction between content, user context, and algorithmic affordances.

The dissertation is organized into three empirical chapters, each aligned with these research questions and connected by their focus on the production-consumption continuum. Chapters 1 and 2 address the production side, using qualitative and mixed-method approaches to reconstruct narratives and topics, while Chapter 3 shifts to the consumption side, using quantitative methods to explore the impact of these narratives on user attitudes. Together, the chapters provide a coherent framework for understanding TikTok's multifaceted role in representing and engaging German Muslim communities.

Chapter 1 examines TikTok as a third space for representation, focusing on its role in promoting empowerment and advocacy for marginalized groups, specifically German Muslim women[1]. The chapter explores how TikTok provides a platform for creators to address issues of discrimination, self-representation, and advocacy. It looks at the diverse content produced by Muslim female creators, ranging from lifestyle and beauty to social justice and religious education, and analyzes how the platform's affordances are used to engage with these issues. Using a mixed-methods approach with an in-depth qualitative focus, the chapter analyzes 320 videos from 32 public accounts. Data collection included web scraping, manual transcription, and qualitative coding to identify prevalent themes, content types, and video formats. The findings reveal that TikTok serves as a site of self-representation, allowing creators to challenge stereotypes, address grievances, and promote positive advocacy. However, it also highlights the challenges posed by hate speech and algorithmic bias that simultaneously empower and constrain creators. This chapter addresses research questions 1 and 2 by investigating the narratives and topics addressed by (female) German Muslim TikTok creators. It provides a basis for understanding the

[1]F. El Sayed and N. Hotait (2024). "Exploring the role of TikTok for intersectionality marginalized groups: the case of Muslim female content creators in Germany." In: *Frontiers in Political Science* 6, p. 1496833; short title: Female Muslim Content Creators

platform's potential as a space for representation and advocacy, which is further explored in Chapter 2 to examine how such narratives intersect with ideological discourses.

Chapter 2 expands on the findings of Chapter 1 and examines the intersection of radical and anti-radical narratives in the content produced by German Islamic TikTok creators[2]. While Chapter 1 focused on female Muslim content creators in general, regardless of their primary content focus, Chapter 2 focuses on Islamic content creators, that is, those specifically identified as participating in the production of content related to Islam as a religion and Muslims. Among religious or theological discourses, it aims to explore how grievance and victimization narratives are framed within religious and political discourses, analyzing their potential to mobilize either radicalization or positive activism. The chapter attempts to map the ideological landscape of TikTok content, focusing on how German Islamic content creators navigate complex socio-political dynamics. The analysis is based on 2,983 videos from 43 accounts, using a qualitative content analysis approach. The chapter employs a hybrid coding framework that integrates deductive indicators of radicalism and anti-radicalism with inductively identified topics. It identifies victimization and grievance as key narratives that often serve as a nexus for various forms of political activism. While indicators of radicalization were only found in a minority of videos, their presence underscores the need to examine how grievances are framed and utilized. Furthermore, issues such as the hijab illustrate the intersection of religious and political narratives, reflecting the complexity of the politicization of religion and its representation on TikTok. This chapter addresses research questions 1 and 2 as well by analyzing how TikTok content relates to topics, ideological content, grievances, and radicalization. It complements Chapter 1 by providing a critical lens on the ideological dimensions of TikTok content, moving from the empowering or positive use of TikTok to adding radicalism as an additional factor, showing how the same platform and the same issues can have diverging political framings. It also lays the groundwork for Chapter 3, which examines how such narratives influence users in the TikTok environment. During my dissertation, Chapter 2 was the first study conducted, with Chapter 1 emerging later as an extension that elaborated on the female creators. However, they are presented here in this order to ensure a coherent and logically structured progression of my arguments.

Chapter 3 shifts the attention from the production of TikTok content to its consumption, exploring how exposure to such content influences the values and attitudes of German Muslim users[3]. This chapter represents a pioneering effort by conducting a first-of-its-kind field experiment on TikTok within this field of research. Its primary goal is to empirically test whether TikTok's algorithm-driven exposure to content fosters

[2] N. Hotait and R. Ali (2024). "Exploring (Anti-)Radicalism on TikTok: German Islamic Content Creators between Advocacy and Activism." In: *Religions* 15.10; short title: Exploring (Anti-)Radicalism on TikTok

[3] N. Hotait (2025). "Social Exclusion and Radicalisation in German Muslim TikTok Users. Presenting Experimental Findings." In: T. Abbas et al. *The Routledge International Handbook on Social Exclusion and Radicalisation*. London: Routledge, Forthcoming; short title: Social Exclusion and Radicalisation

radicalization or can serve as a preventive force. Specifically, the study examines how users engage with content that addresses grievances, social exclusion, and political messages. The experimental design involved 99 participants who were randomly assigned to treatment, control, and survey groups. Participants in the treatment and control groups were asked to follow TikTok accounts managed by a research team, which posted selected videos daily for 14 days. All content used in the experiment was derived from the qualitative analyses in Chapters 1 and 2, ensuring consistency around the themes of grievance, discrimination, and social exclusion. The treatment group was exposed to potentially radicalizing content, while the control group viewed preventive or positive material. In contrast, the survey group viewed the same videos as the treatment group outside of the algorithmic TikTok environment, allowing for a comparison between algorithm-mediated content exposure and isolated video viewing.

Pre- and post-intervention surveys measured changes in sociopolitical attitudes and included questions to assess participants' recall, engagement, and evaluation of the content. The analysis accounted for individual contexts using covariates such as gender, age, religiosity, educational background, and experiences of discrimination. The results showed limited overall changes in attitudes, with most participants showing resilience to the content. However, there was a slight increase in willingness to engage in political activism and in the salience of perceived grievances, particularly in scenarios that depicted structural exclusion and discrimination against Muslims as a social group. More specifically, several cases in the treatment group were more inclined to use violence or illegal political action to address said grievances after the experiment. Responses to recall questions that assessed whether participants remembered encountering the videos, their content, and their messages, as well as open-ended questions, provided critical insight into whether and how participants engaged with the material. These findings highlight the critical role of TikTok's recommendation algorithm in mediating content exposure and shaping user interaction, which then determines the potential for radicalization. This chapter addresses research question 3 by empirically evaluating the impact of TikTok content on users' attitudes and values. Drawing on the content developed in Chapters 1 and 2, it integrates the narrative and ideological framing explored in those chapters with the measurable effects of content consumption. This integration contributes to a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of TikTok's social and algorithmic effects.

Much of the empirical approach, particularly Chapters 1 and 2 of this dissertation, is informed by the fact that we have limited prior knowledge about TikTok and German Muslim users. This lack of understanding makes it challenging to confidently infer, attribute, or derive reliable expectations regarding radicalization on TikTok based on general theoretical models or middle-range theories from other sociological domains, as these rarely address the unique characteristics of TikTok, German Muslims, or the intersection of both–how Muslims use and relate to TikTok. Why are these specifics so important? Why can the contextualities of social media, or rather TikTok and German

Muslims, not be subsumed under the generalization of other work on radicalization, but must first be explored and understood? Previously, I rigorously developed a theoretical framework and model of TikTok radicalization to provide a conceptual understanding of this phenomenon. In this model, however, I specifically identify existing narratives, their persuasiveness, and patterns of engagement as mechanisms hypothesized to be central to TikTok radicalization. Yet we still lack substantive knowledge about their actual content, properties, nature, dynamics, and how TikTok's algorithm influences them. While certain aspects of the algorithm's functionality are known, its precise technical workings remain inherently elusive. Similarly, while some narratives have been established, our understanding of the content production of German Muslim accounts on TikTok remains largely shrouded in uncertainty.

Consequently, this dissertation adopts–indeed, must adopt–an investigative approach, exploring an uncharted domain to describe its substance and mechanics (see Shaffir and Stebbins, 1991, pp. 5–6). This approach is necessary even though the study draws on existing theory to construct a theoretical framework, grounds its selection of information and coding in the literature, and uses a plethora of theoretical and empirical evidence to build a compelling case for why this field warrants exploration and description. But, as King et al. (1994, p. 34) put it: "Description often comes first; it is hard to develop explanations before we know something about the world and what needs to be explained on the basis of what characteristics". Even Chapter 3, which evaluates the effects of a field experiment on TikTok, does not intend to test or falsify a specific causal mechanism beyond the link between TikTok consumption and radicalization. Instead, it explores the role of TikTok content consumption in radicalization, seeking to describe the multifactorial context of TikTok and its potential effects–or lack thereof–while acknowledging its limitations and significant gaps in current research.

Although the term description "has come to be used as a euphemism for failed or unproven causal inference" (Gerring, 2012, p. 721), description is, and should be, fundamental to sociology in order to ensure that it is a scientifically and theoretically rigorous discipline (Besbris and Khan, 2017). In this sense, the descriptive and exploratory nature of this study is not a bitter consequence of limited knowledge–it is its strength. By developing and applying novel, innovative methods to a socially relevant yet understudied topic, this dissertation lays the groundwork for further research to advance our empirical and theoretical understanding of TikTok and social media radicalization and representation more broadly. Because "science, after all, is largely the generation of novel empirical findings" (Besbris and Khan, 2017, p. 152).

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Chapter 1

Exploring the Role of TikTok for Intersectionality Marginalized Groups: The Case of Muslim Female Content Creators in Germany

Fatima El Sayed and Nader Hotait

Abstract

Social media has become a central part of everyday life, providing spaces for communication, self-expression, and social mobilization. TikTok, specifically, has emerged as a prominent platform for marginalized groups, providing opportunities for activism and representation. However, research falls short in examining the specific role of TikTok for Muslim women in Germany who face intersecting forms of marginalization. This shortcoming reflects a broader lack of research on the experiences of marginalized groups within TikTok's logics and affordances, and what functions the platform fulfills for these communities.

Against this backdrop, this study examines TikTok's role as a platform for Muslim female content creators in Germany and its broader implications for marginalized communities. Our research is guided by the following questions: (a) What are the main themes and topics that are being brought forward by Muslim women content creators on TikTok? (b) What technical affordances do they use to communicate their content? (c) What functions does TikTok fulfill for Muslim women as an intersectionally marginalized group? We analyze 320 videos from 32 public TikTok accounts identified through snowball sampling. Data collection includes automated web scraping, manual transcription,

and qualitative coding. This allows us to identify main topics, video formats, and content types to answer our research questions.

Our findings show that Muslim women produce diverse content on TikTok, ranging from beauty and lifestyle to religious education and social justice. They shape the platform's functionalities through creative use, while TikTok's algorithm and virality logic drive creators to blend entertainment with personal content. The hijab emerges as a unique issue, framed within both political and fashion discourses. Overall, TikTok functions as a "third space" where Muslim women challenge mainstream stereotypes and offer alternative interpretations of their identity. While TikTok provides empowerment and visibility, it also exposes Muslim women to hate speech and harassment. The platform provides tools to counter these issues, but the underlying social hierarchies often limit their visibility, making TikTok both a site of empowerment and vulnerability. This study highlights the need for further research into the role of social media for marginalized groups, particularly across platforms, gender, and religion.

This chapter was published in *Frontiers in Political Science* (El Sayed and Hotait, 2024). The version presented here differs only in minor changes to section titles for overall coherence, table and figure formatting, and correction of grammatical and numbering errors.

1.1. Introduction

Social media has become an essential facet of everyday life, deeply embedded in various spheres. It not only provides platforms for communication, networking, and information exchange but also functions as a marketplace and a medium for self-expression and self-representation (Dijck, 2013; Feher, 2021). Additionally, social media plays a pivotal role in facilitating social mobilization and fostering counter-discourses, thereby shaping the political fabric of society (Brown et al., 2017; González-Bailón et al., 2013; Poell and Borra, 2012; Theocharis et al., 2014).

One such social media platform, renowned for both its popularity and notoriety, is TikTok. In recent years, TikTok has expanded its user base globally, hosting one of the largest and youngest user demographics. TikTok stands out among social media platforms by providing a substantial amount of entertaining content and a sophisticated algorithm that adeptly matches the diverse interests of its users (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). Another feature that has significantly contributed to TikTok's popularity is its unique curation approach, which enables users to generate a substantial number of views for their content. Unlike other platforms that predominantly recommend content from followed accounts and factor in the prior performance of an account and its followers, TikTok's algorithm does not solely show content from followed accounts, nor does it consider follower count or previous high-performing videos as direct factors in its recommendation system. This allows lesser-known, and lesser-followed accounts to generate viewership, even among users who are not their followers, serving as an incentive for more users to engage in content production with the potential for substantial reach (TikTok, 2020; Zhang and Liu, 2021).

A considerable body of literature has emerged around the use and user experiences on TikTok (Cervi, 2021; Cheng and Li, 2023; Ling et al., 2023; Pan et al., 2023), its specific affordances (Schellewald, 2023; Zhao and Wagner, 2023), gratifications (Vaterlaus and Winter, 2021), and how users understand and interact with TikTok's algorithm (Bhandari and Bimo, 2020; Hödl and Myrach, 2023; Issar, 2023; Zhao, 2020. These studies are concerned with the interaction between TikTok's technical workings and human behavior, exploring how users engage with the platform and its technical features. They also delve into the quest to decipher the exact workings of TikTok's algorithm, which remains a central focus for users, companies, and scholars alike, as it determines content curation and influences virality and marketing dynamics. Another strand of literature that is more grounded in sociological inquiry explores social dynamics and implications on TikTok focusing on questions of (self-)representation, identity construction (Barta and Andalibi, 2021; Civila and Jaramillo-Dent, 2022), and community building as well as (political) mobilization and activism (Abbas et al., 2022; Cervi and Divon, 2023; Hotait and Ali, 2024).

Extending this research, recent studies have highlighted TikTok's significant role in

providing a platform for minority activism and representation (Hiebert and Kortes-Miller, 2023; Lee and Lee, 2023; Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded, 2022). Drawing on frameworks from post-colonial and feminist studies, as well as other social justice perspectives, these studies illustrate how minorities—such as Black women, Asian/American women, LGBTIQ communities, and Muslim women—have utilized TikTok to resist and counteract stigmatization, discrimination, and exclusion. While these studies provide valuable insights into the potential use of social media platforms to challenge conventional social power structures and contribute to a more egalitarian and democratic culture, they tend to be either limited to the issues of discrimination and stigmatization or focus on specific political moments or events. This approach often ignores the potentially diverse ways in which minority groups engage in the digital sphere, concerning not just social grievances or political action. This is particularly true for Muslim women, where the body of literature is still limited regarding what they use TikTok for and how the platform's technical affordances guide this usage. Given this research gap to date, we set out to explore the themes and topics that Muslim female content creators address on TikTok and how they make use of the features available on the platform.

Our study focuses on Germany, which is home to the second largest Muslim population in Europe, with 5.3–5.6 million Muslims (Pfündel et al., 2021). This choice provides a compelling backdrop, as it represents a significant layer of the intersectional experiences of Muslim women being both a religious and often ethnic minority. The various layers of their experiences, shaped by minority status, race, ethnicity, religion, and gender, make them a particularly illustrative sample for exploring the potential of TikTok for marginalized groups in general.

Our research is guided by the following research questions: (a) What are the main themes and topics that are being brought forward by Muslim women content creators on TikTok? (b) What technical affordances do they use to communicate their content? (c) What functions does TikTok fulfill for Muslim women as an intersectionally marginalized group?

Grounding our research in previous work that has examined the opportunities and threats that social media pose to women and racialized minorities, we present our basic assumptions and our key theoretical concepts. We then explain our methodology including a description of the sampling strategy, the sample, the data collection, and our coding and analytical strategy. In line with our research questions, we identify the most salient topics in our data to get a sense of the main issues Muslim women are concerned within the digital sphere. We then provide an overview of the most common video formats to address the technical affordances utilized and content types, examining the various styles in which topics are presented. To gain a deeper understanding of Muslim women's use of TikTok and the purposes it serves, we analyze the overlap between topics and the overlap between topics, content types, and video formats. Our discussion summarizes key findings and discusses limitations and prospects for future research on social media,

particularly TikTok.

Our key findings suggest that Muslim female content creators present a wide range of different topics, from fashion and beauty, product promotion, and commerce to religious and theological knowledge sharing, social justice, and political advocacy, using the technical affordances of TikTok in creative ways. Many of their videos deal with ordinary issues that resonate with mainstream discourses. However, Muslim women's content stands out for representing their intersectional lived experiences based on their religious, ethnic, racial, and gender identities. While TikTok serves as a Third Space for Muslim women, offering new forms of self-expression and the articulation of hybrid identities, we show that the modes of representation selected are very much shaped by the nature of the content, the logics of TikTok, and current trends.

With our study, we contribute to the literature on Muslim women in non-Muslim majority contexts and their representation in online spaces. We further show how social media platforms, such as TikTok, are used by minorities and point to the potential and limits. Finally, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of TikTok's technical affordances and how they influence and transform forms of digital representation. This includes not only comprehending how these technical features are utilized but also examining the types of representations they foster, allow, and facilitate.

1.1.1. Muslim Women in Non-Muslim Majority Contexts

A considerable body of literature has emerged in recent decades that explores Muslim women's representation and activism, both offline (Bullock, 2005; El Sayed, 2023; Povey, 2009; van Es and van den Brandt, 2020; Wadia, 2015) and online (Eckert and Chadha, 2013; Hirji, 2021; Islam, 2019; Piela, 2012). Particularly in light of the hypervisibility of Muslim women through public controversies over religious clothing and conduct, and the simultaneous absence of their voices in these debates, these studies have contributed to a more complex and nuanced understanding of Muslim women and their lived experiences in Muslim minority countries.

Studies within the framework of sociology of religion have focused on Muslim women's religious practices and religious interpretations, both in Muslim-majority and Muslim-minority contexts (Bendixsen, 2013; Biagini, 2020; Brünig and Fleischmann, 2015; Paz and Kook, 2021; Topal, 2017; Zempi, 2016). Those focusing on Muslim women within Muslim minority countries examine how religious practices have been reconciled or transformed through diasporic experiences and/or transnational movements. Particular attention has been paid to the significance of the hijab, Muslim women's interpretation of religious norms and Islamic sources, and space-making for Muslim women within traditional Islamic institutions (Hammer, 2020; Kuppinger, 2012; Spielhaus, 2012; Wang, 2017). The last decades have witnessed a shift in researching Muslim women solely in terms of their Muslim identity, thus primarily as religious agents, to a conceptualization

that allows Muslim women to be perceived through multiple identity markers. This has entailed a perception of Muslim women both as active citizens and as racialized minorities who are limited by structural constraints rather than an inherently oppressive religion. While theological questions and dynamics within Muslim communities continue to draw scholarly attention, sociological research on Muslim women has increased.

As several empirical studies indicate, Muslim women, especially those who are visible through the hijab, continue to experience frequent discrimination and exclusion that affect their mental health (Yeasmeen et al., 2023), social and political participation, and socioeconomic positions (Beigang et al., 2017; Weichselbaumer, 2020). Scholars have adopted the concept of gendered Islamophobia to analyze the multiple discriminations against Muslim women based on their gender, race, ethnicity, and religion (Alimahomed-Wilson, 2020; Chakraborti and Zempi, 2012; Perry, 2014; Zempi, 2020). While the gender-sensitive lens has primarily served to describe the intersectional experiences of and impacts on Muslim women, it has also proved useful in understanding the gendered racialization of Muslim men (Selod, 2019; Wigger, 2019; Yurdakul and Korteweg, 2021).

1.1.2. Muslim Women in the Digital Space

With the advent of the Internet, new opportunities have emerged both to actively counter discrimination and stigmatization to create safer spaces in which the experiences of minorities can be shared and in which community members can offer each other help and support (Civila and Jaramillo-Dent, 2022; Durrani, 2021; Gatwiri and Moran, 2023; Hirji, 2021; Islam, 2019; Khamis, 2021; Piela, 2012; Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded, 2022).

Our research on Muslim female content creators on TikTok builds on an emerging body of scholarship that examines Muslim women's use of the Internet and their expressions and experiences in cyberspace. Similar to other demographics, Muslim women's presence in digital spaces has increased significantly over the past two decades, attracting scholarly interest in both Muslim majority contexts such as Indonesia, Kuwait, and Turkey (Baulch and Pramiyanti, 2018; Beta, 2019; Karakavak and Özbölük, 2022; Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2017) and in Muslim minority contexts such as the United States, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands (Arab, 2022; Islam, 2019; Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2017; Mahmudova and Evolvi, 2021; Pennington, 2018a). Given the dominance of private platforms and channels in the 1990s and 2000s, and the previously limited public representation of Muslim women in virtual spaces, early studies have focused primarily on Muslim women-only spaces such as newsgroups and blogs (Akou, 2010; Piela, 2012). While one strand of literature focuses on how Muslim women engage in and shape religious discourses online (Akou, 2010; Pennington, 2018b; Piela, 2010b, 2012), another strand explores Muslim women's activism, particularly against anti-Muslim racism and sexism, both within mainstream society and within Muslim communities (Hirji, 2021; Islam, 2019, 2023; Khamis, 2022; Pennington, 2018a). A significant number

of studies in the field of Muslim women online have adopted a progressive perspective, highlighting the potential of the Internet— and more recently—social media to foster religious discourses that promote gender equality in Muslim communities. One example is the pioneering work of Anna Piela (2012), who examines the religious discourses of a transnational newsgroup. Her findings suggest that the newsgroup allows Muslim women to connect across physical borders and discuss gender-related religious issues in a safe(r) space. Due to the private nature of this space and partial anonymity, Muslim women can share sensitive issues and test arguments that may be useful in other analogous contexts. While Piela highlights the potential for critical reflection and questioning of religious norms and the exchange of alternative interpretations, she also observes a reproduction of conservative positions by some women (Piela, 2012). This demonstrates the ambiguous nature of the Internet in enabling a variety of discourses that are not necessarily liberal or progressive. However, as Piela points out elsewhere (Piela, 2010b), "Whereas Muslim women professing different views on gender relations in Islam tend not to engage in dialog with each other in the off-line world, they participate in a common online debate which is more likely to result in shared understandings" (Piela, 2010a, p. 425).

With the growing popularity of new social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok, as well as the prevalence of visual and audio-visual forms of representation, Muslim women have gained increased visibility online by capitalizing on new technological affordances available to them (Hotait and Ali, 2024; Khamis, 2021; Nisa, 2021). For instance, they have used social media to enact and negotiate their hybrid identities by displaying different expressions of the hijab and promoting new modest fashion styles (Arab, 2022; Khamis, 2022; Poulis et al., 2024). As demonstrated by Kavakci and Kraeplin (2017) in their study of hijabi social media personalities, Muslim women's fashion style is significantly influenced by mainstream fashion, while modest fashion has made its way into the mainstream through the normalization of religious bodies in the digital sphere. As a consequence, "the line between modesty and immodesty, religion and culture is blurred through the process of mediatization" (Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2017, p. 864) and the meaning of the hijab is challenged and transformed (Arab, 2022; Karakavak and Özbölük, 2022; Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2017). Consistent with other research (Beta, 2019; Poulis et al., 2024), the study shows that Muslim influencers' self-representation online is further driven by market logics. Thus, social media should be conceptualized not only in terms of its ability to empower Muslim women and promote inclusivity but also as a marketplace driven by economic incentives and commercial interests (Poulis et al., 2024). Beyond their aesthetic representation as hijabistas and fashionistas, Muslim women use social media for political activism (Hirji, 2021; Islam, 2019; Khamis, 2021). While Twitter in particular has been known to be used for political mobilization, Instagram and TikTok have been perceived more as entertainment-based platforms (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2022). However, in the last few years, there has been a rapid growth in academic research on political activism on TikTok (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2022; Civila, Bonilla-del-rio, et

al., 2023; Literat et al., 2023; Medina Serrano et al., 2020; Moir, 2023). In their explorative study on pro-Palestinian activism on TikTok, Cervi and Marín-Lladó (2022) illustrate how female influencers exploit TikTok's technological affordances to express solidarity with and support of the Palestinian cause. Identifying a new form of digital activism, "playful activism," the authors illustrate how female content creators "capitalize[…] on popular subculture, the make-up culture, transforming it into an act of resistance, completely breaking off from the traditional narrative" (Cervi and Marín-Lladó, 2022, p. 422).

In light of the rise of Islamophobia in Western societies, researchers have paid increasing attention to how Islamophobia plays out in virtual spaces. Recent studies look at the impact and counter-strategies against hate speech, defamation, and discrimination online (Hirji, 2021; Islam, 2019, 2023; Khamis, 2022). While these studies contribute to our understanding of Islamophobia and how Muslim women face it as an intersectionally marginalized group in virtual spaces, they obscure other life experiences and expressions of Muslim women. As a result, Muslim women only become visible in the context of discrimination and Islamophobia. While we acknowledge the importance of anti-Muslim racism for Muslim women as it affects their daily lives, we seek to highlight the diverse ways in which Muslim women engage online.

1.1.3. TikTok as a Third Space for Muslim Women?

As shown by Civila, Bonilla-del-rio, et al. (2023) in their study of the hashtag #Islamterrorism on TikTok, social media provides a space where counter-narratives can be articulated and publicly shared, challenging misconceptions about Islam that are present in mainstream media. They find that "TikTok allows [Muslim minorities] to seek recognition as well as to generate discourses that make their culture visible" (Civila, Bonilla-del-rio, et al., 2023, p. 10). To capture the specificity of social media as an in-between space and the dynamics and discourses it enables, particularly for marginalized communities, scholars have invoked the concept of the third space.

The concept of the third space has been popularized by the works of Bhabha (1994). According to Homi Bhabha, the third space is not primarily a physical space, but rather a social and cultural space characterized by hybridity. As such, the third space "enables other positions to emerge [...] [and] displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom" (Rutherford, 1990, p. 211). In this sense, third spaces might be understood as "sites of resistance, where hegemonic and normative ways of seeing the world are challenged and, perhaps, transcended" (Pennington, 2018b, p. 622). Drawing on the notion of the third space which "exist[s] between private and public, between institution and individual, between authority and individual autonomy, between large media framings and individual 'pro-sumption,' between local and translocal" (Hoover,

2023, p. 14 we explore what issues Muslim women raise and how they are expressed using the affordances of TikTok.

While empirical studies have demonstrated that digital third spaces are crucial for Muslim women to challenge stereotypes, subvert hegemonic discourses, and advance their struggles for social justice (Islam, 2019; Pennington, 2018b, scholars have also noted the limitations and risks of using social media. For example, Civila, Bonilla-del-rio, et al. (2023) have emphasized that visibility alone is not enough to overcome stigma and change the social status of minorities, but rather recognition. TikTok may facilitate greater visibility for Muslim women, who sometimes become celebrities with large numbers of followers and likes, but this does not automatically imply social recognition for Muslim women. This finding is also supported by Simões et al. whose "results suggest that the platform gives rise to ideas and discourses that reify unbalanced power relations" (2023, p. 244). In addition to these limitations, Muslims and Muslim women, in particular, are at risk of becoming victims of cyberbullying and/or misogynistic hate speech (Allen, 2015; Chadha et al., 2020). This confirms previous findings on women's experiences in the digital sphere (Drakett et al., 2018; Eckert, 2018; Henry and Powell, 2015). In this sense, TikTok and social media more broadly represent an ambivalent phenomenon, that provides tools for empowerment and liberation but also poses threats and risks, particularly to marginalized groups. In line with this observed double bind, we explore the extent to which this applies to Muslim female content creators on TikTok. Through insights into the multiple uses and functions that TikTok fulfills for Muslim women as an intersectionally marginalized group, we hope to illuminate recent developments and broader trends shaping Islam and Muslim life in Germany. We further show how Muslim women make use of the platform to represent and address their intersectional life experiences.

1.2. Data and Methods

1.2.1. Sampling Strategy

The primary subjects of this study are Muslim female content creators based in Germany. Identification of individuals fitting these criteria was established through their self-identification as Muslim and female in their TikTok profiles or through their content explicitly. Our sample was assembled using a snowball sampling technique, initiated in August 2023 and completed in December 2023 concurrently with data collection. We began by searching for terms related to "Islam" and "Muslim" in conjunction with "Germany" and "Deutschland" on the TikTok webpage. The accounts identified served as a bridge to additional accounts suggested as similar by TikTok. All accounts were reviewed for clear self-identification as female, Muslim, and location in Germany as well; those not meeting these criteria were excluded. We acknowledge that this selection process is presumptive on our part, as it ascribes being Muslim based on explicit declaration. This

approach may lead to selection bias by overlooking undeclared Muslim identities and potentially homogenizing this diverse group, as we only consider the subset of Muslim women who explicitly and publicly self-identify as such.

To ensure they display a certain impact on TikTok, we included only those accounts with a minimum of 13,000 followers. We posit that a substantial following indicates content relevance and resonance with its intended audience, thereby serving as a proxy for identifying the most socially pervasive and pertinent social patterns online. This specific threshold was determined after observing that accounts with smaller followings often lacked consistent content creation and engagement patterns.

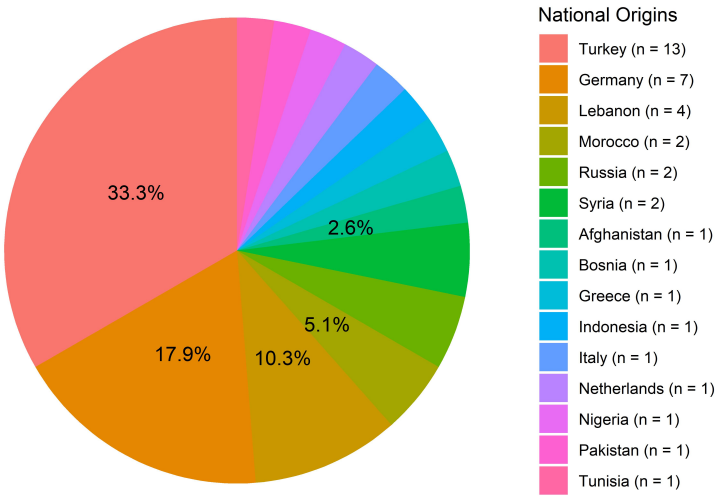
The sampling process continued until the addition of new accounts ceased to provide additional variety or depth to our dataset. This approach yielded an initial pool of 42 public accounts. After eliminating inactive accounts, had removed their content, or had shifted to private settings by the time we collected the data, we finalized our sample at 32 accounts, representing the most engaged and influential actors for our set demographic.

1.2.2. Sample Description

Out of 32 accounts, 29 are run by individual Muslim women, and three are run by cisgender couples (see Table 1.3). The decision to include couples corresponds to the simple fact that these couples consist of women who produce content related to their lives, whether individually, about, or in collaboration with their partner. All of these accounts are relatively popular, supporting our earlier statement that our sample represents the most engaged and influential public actors for our set demographic on TikTok. The average views range from approximately 3,000 to around 785,000 views per video for one account (see Table 1.3). Our sample also represents a diverse array of national backgrounds, which were identified through various markers in the content. The majority (33%, 13 accounts) have a Turkish national origin (see Figure 1.1). The largest group by national origin among German Muslims is Turkish, with 45% (Pfündel et al., 2021, p. 42). Our sample further includes content creators of German (17.9%, seven accounts), Lebanese (10.3%, four accounts), Moroccan, Russian, and Syrian origin (5.1%, two accounts each). This not only demonstrates the national diversity of German Muslim content creators on TikTok, which is reflective of Germany's Muslim demographic—largely consisting of individuals from Turkish and Arabic-speaking backgrounds, as well as those with German backgrounds, including converts and children of parents with mixed German and non-German heritage—but also showcases the diversity within our sample. This diversity is reflected in the mix of non-hijabi (4) and hijabi (28) women, some of whom wear the niqab, as well as the representation of followers of both Sunni and Shia denominations. At least one content creator, according to her testimony, wears the niqab for the sole purpose of protecting her privacy online.

TikTok is a dynamic platform where even popular accounts are sometimes deleted or set to private for an indefinite amount of time. As a result, observing a specific field or demographic on TikTok may only provide a snapshot of it at a given moment. Nonetheless, we tracked the availability of our sampled accounts as of July 2024 to ensure that the specific set of accounts we selected is representative of German Muslim female content creators, and therefore their content is still prevalent as we write. In fact, except two accounts, most are still available, either under their original or renamed handles (see Table 1.3).

Figure 1.1. National origins of the content creators



1.2.3. Data Collection

Data collection was split into two main methodologies: automated web scraping and manual transcription of video content. We employed web scraping to gather comprehensive data from each video across the 32 accounts, which included metrics such as the publication date, video description, duration, and engagement statistics (likes, views, shares, comments). This resulted in an initial dataset comprising approximately 9,000 videos. Collecting comprehensive video data allowed us to (a) select a random subset of the videos for qualitative analysis and (b) incorporate video metrics, like views, into our findings by matching them with our qualitative results.

From this dataset, we randomly sampled 10 videos per account, totaling 320 videos, for deeper qualitative analysis. As illustrated in Table 1.1, the sample demonstrates similar distributions to the corpus of all videos in terms of the timeframe and the average metrics for the videos included. Through this assessment, we hope to ensure that our sample mirrors the spectrum of our content universe.

Table 1.1. Video vetrics of scraped and sampled data

Data	Videos	Start	Stop	Avg.Views	Avg.Likes	Avg.Comments
All	8936	‘19-09-28	‘23-12-23	173716 (±17.1K)	15161 (±1489)	202 (±23)
Sample	320	‘20-03-11	‘23-12-21	147061 (±35.7K)	18123 (±4860)	173 (±69)

95% CI in brackets

The selected videos were initially transcribed verbatim by the transcription service Amberscript, which handled all videos containing audible language. These initial transcriptions were subsequently edited and corrected by us to ensure accuracy. German quotes that were used to illustrate our findings were then translated by us into English. To safeguard the anonymity of our research subjects, we pseudonymized their usernames and paraphrased or aggregated any information that could identify their accounts. Driven by our goal to dissect the diverse topics, technical affordances, and their functionalities, our transcriptions included not just the audio content but also relevant visual elements. Hence, wherever possible, we enriched our transcriptions with on-screen text, detailed descriptions of appearances, patterns of physical movements, depictions of scenery and objects, and the various video-audio techniques employed. This also ensured that content was elicited, even if audible elements were not available and hence, not transcribed by Amberscript.

1.2.4. Coding and Analytical Strategy

Our primary methodological approach was qualitative, utilizing coding of our transcriptions as the central hermeneutic tool. This approach allowed us to deeply engage with the data, guided by our specific research questions and epistemic interests. We implemented a hybrid coding strategy using the QDA software MAXQDA that blended deductive and inductive elements. Three deductive (a-priori) codes were established based on our predefined research interests, serving as our coding framework (see Table 1.2): main topics, video formats (TikTok-specific techniques, e.g., music, templates, green screen, stitches), and content types (e.g., vlog, comedy, tutorial). Working within these categories aligns with previous research that has recognized the relevance of content production forms, techniques, and affordances used by TikTok creators, as well as the functionalities these elements fulfill for users, such as advancing political activism (see Abbas et al., 2022; Cervi

and Divon, 2023) or enhancing visibility more broadly (see Abidin, 2020). However, while these codes were initially outlined, they were populated with content extracted from the text without predetermined categories, maintaining openness in the coding process. For instance, while we aimed to code prevalent topics, we did not predetermine them but rather identified them through the coding process inductively.

Our inductive coding strategy, while not a conventional application of grounded theory, significantly borrowed its coding methodology (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin and Strauss, 1990). We engaged in an iterative coding process that began with coding at lower levels of abstraction and gradually incorporated novel elements into our coding system. This process evolved until reaching higher abstraction levels, continuing until no new categories or patterns emerged, and data could be assigned to established codes. In this mode, topics were identified based on their salience within the video and their role in defining the overall content (subtopics, Table 1.4). These topics were then aggregated into broader main topics as the coding process progressed, based on their thematic connections (see Table 1.2; Table 1.4). This iterative refinement was supported by constant memoing to track developments and insights throughout the coding process.

Each video served as an individual analytical unit, with the potential for multiple categories to be coded per video. To complement our qualitative findings and provide a broader view of the content landscape, we also conducted descriptive quantitative analysis of our coding categories. This analysis helped to outline the prevalence and distribution of our codes, providing a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play within our sampled TikTok content.

Table 1.2. Coding categories, their respective main code, and frequency (n)

Main Topic	n	Video Format	n	Content Type	n
Personal and Social Life	103	Music	186	Presentation	54
Beauty, Style, and Fashion	70	Audio Templates	32	Comedy	49
Promotion, Tips, Commerce, Inspiration	62	Reply (Comment)	26	Diashow/Image Sequence	44
Religious and Theological Topics and Knowledge	59	Image Blending	13	Vlog Formats/Impressions	43
Social Justice and Political Advocacy	50	Stitches	13	Text-Commented Video	29
Hijab and Life as a Hijabi	39	Green Screening	10	Storytelling	28
Lived Religion	36	Filters	5	Dialogue/Acting	25
Self(re-)presentation	14	Slideshow	2	Singalong	18
MISC	11			Dance/Choreography	17
(Post)Migration	10			Tutorial	14
				Speakalong	8
				Cooking Show	4
				Challenge	3
				Poetry Slam	2
				Singing	2
				Interview	1

Each main code is counted once per video

1.3. Findings

1.3.1. Main Topics

"Personal and Social Life"

The most dominant topic identified was "Personal and Social Life," which appeared in 103 of the 320 videos sampled. It encompassed a variety of sub-topics including partnership and relationship dynamics, travel and living abroad, friendship, family life, school and university experiences, embarrassing moments, leisure activities, and general lifestyle discussions. The pervasiveness of the category "Personal and Social Life" is symptomatic of an ongoing trend toward a blurring of traditional boundaries between the public and private realms. Topics that were traditionally understood as private are increasingly shared on public platforms like TikTok. One classical example is found in one of PT29's videos, vlogging her day:

> "Today is day 20, and I'm taking you along again. We always have a classic Turkish breakfast. But today, for a change, we had something Albanian, Speca me maze [...]. We're heading to a henna celebration soon. I'll show you my dress. It's currently from H&M. I'm pairing it with these shoes from Deichmann".
>
> [The video shows her taking the bus and attending the celebration, including a full-body shot of her outfit. Afterwards, we see her back home, opening a box of pastries]
>
> "[...] And I'll eat this now, and then that's it for today"

In that sense, the content creators resemble (online-)celebrities using private matters to gain social media popularity and increase parasocial interactions. "[W]hen celebrities share their life and directly communicate about theses [sic!] experiences, fans tend to feel as if those celebrities were socially present in their life" (Kim and Song, 2016, p. 574). Further, Marwick shows that the presentation of private life fulfills not one but several functions: "While micro-celebrities are supposed to reveal personal information to seem authentic, self-branders are encouraged to edit private moments in the name of brand consistency" (Marwick, 2013, p. 98).

Through their engagement in personal and often quite "worldly" topics, Muslim female content creators display their multifaceted experiences, challenging the societal perceptions that often define them exclusively through their religious identity. They claim space for self-representation that tends to be denied to them within mainstream media. Sharing insights into their daily lives that are relatable to non-Muslim audiences can break down stereotypical societal views that portray them as different or other (Chakraborti and Zempi, 2012).

Nonetheless, several actors adhere to practices of privacy. PT4 never reveals her face in her videos, except when wearing a niqab, with a censor bar covering her eyes. In fact, throughout her TikTok profile, she frequently mentions that, from an Islamic perspective, she objects to showing herself publicly. Similarly, PT13, although she produces content showing herself, either wears a niqab, avoids filming above her neck, or covers her face by holding her phone in front of it. PT27 explicitly states in her TikTok profile that she wears the niqab on social media for privacy reasons. So even though many creators reveal aspects of their day-to-day lives, many of them still adhere to a sense of privacy and engage in privacy practices, which, in some cases, are also explicitly justified from an Islamic perspective.

"Beauty, Style, and Fashion"

"Beauty, Style, and Fashion" was coded 70 times and includes videos such as clothing and outfits, makeup, and hairstyle. The category typically relates to how these creators showcase, navigate, and participate in broader beauty and fashion trends, reflecting their engagement with contemporary aesthetics. At the same time, it contains elements that emphasize their commitment to their faith as Muslims, featuring beauty and fashion items and styles that are compatible with Islamic norms. Thus, this topic not only reflects an overall trend among young women on social media capitalizing on their appearance (Kennedy, 2020; Zulli, 2018), but also indicates the rise of the modest fashion industry. Responding to the Western fashion industry's failure to provide fashion that is both compatible with Islamic norms and stylish, these content creators are promoting brands, items and new styles that appeal to young, urban Muslim women. The fact that these creators not only display Islamic or modest fashion styles but also market Islamic brands demonstrates how marketable this fashion domain has become (Arab, 2022; Kavakci and Kraeplin, 2017).

One example showcasing the latest fashion trends and offering beauty advice is a video by creator PT18, showing how she removes the dark circles under her eyes with a specific skin product. Another example is PT9, who provides a hijab tutorial. Furthermore, it highlights their authority in guiding discussions and setting trends in these areas toward their target audience, signifying the emergence of Muslim women as a new consumer group and target market (Barta, Belanche, et al., 2023; Nugraha et al., 2023; Pemberton and Takhar, 2021; Wheeler, 2022). This is illustrated by several examples in which content creators advertise beauty products or fashion items from specific brands, including Islamic ones, at times providing an affiliate link that offers discounts (e.g., PT5, P14, PT20). The inherent marketing and commercialization logic prevalent throughout TikTok is underscored once more by this dynamic (Barta, Belanche, et al., 2023). However, as a function of their self-branding on social media, by utilizing their looks and details about their private life for example, they constitute their bodies and lives as "salable commodity"

(Marwick, 2013, p. 166). Similarly to adherence to privacy, we see actors who engage in aspects of beauty or beautification to varying degrees. Some, like PT2, PT15, PT5, and PT8, participate in beauty topics with a focus on openly enhancing and presenting their physical or facial appearance through makeup and fashion. The former two include hairstyles, while the latter two emphasize hijab styles and a stronger adherence to modest fashion. In contrast, PT13 and PT17 avoid showing their faces, so their beautification focuses solely on the aesthetics of modest or Islamic clothing. Some creators do not seem to prioritize beauty topics or extraordinary beautification practices, regardless of whether they wear a hijab or not. This includes PT27 and PT30 who wear a niqab, PT3 who wears a hijab, and PT16 who does not wear a hijab. These are accounts where other topics take precedence over beauty content. Within the same actor, such as PT5, one can observe varying practices of beauty and modesty in fashion, ranging from blends of Western fashion styles with her hijab to more orthodox Islamic clothing, including abayas and traditional hijab styles. The varying and diverse adherence to Islamic concepts like privacy and modesty reflects the diversity and blend of conservative, orthodox, and liberal practices among Muslim women on TikTok.

"Promotion, Tips, Commerce, Inspiration"

The third most prominent coded main topic is "Promotion, Tips, Commerce, Inspiration" (62) which includes content such as Hauls, Unboxing, Self-Care routines, Food Vlogs, and DIY projects. This topic generally has an instructional character, mostly aimed at improving various aspects of life, with a significant portion reflecting commercialized or consumerist content, while another part focuses on wellbeing. Analogous to the "Beauty, Style, and Fashion" topic, this category also highlights a supply-and-demand dynamic among Muslim women, where content creators provide valuable information and knowledge to an audience that actively consumes it. The commercialized aspect further illuminates the market logic present, similar to the dynamics observed in beauty-related content. Given that many of these content creators attract over 100,000 views per video on average, it is clear that they are influential figures within their online community (see Table 1.3). Several videos on this topic garnered hundreds of thousands of views. This viewership not only underscores the relevance of this content but also shows that these creators are shaping commerce, self-care, and well-being. While the topics mentioned thus far are similar to the mainstream content produced by other creators, they are also influenced by factors like gender and religion. This can be seen in examples such as PT3 introducing the audience to two children's books from an Islamic bookshop to learn the Arabic alphabet and language, which either contain Islamic examples or are specifically oriented toward understanding and reading the Quran. Similarly, PT26 promotes self-care books that have helped improve her life, two of which are Islamic. Other examples include showcasing restaurants that adhere to Islamic dietary norms, as seen with PT7

and PT19, or discussing beauty products—either reviewing them, like PT12, or warning against them for issues like inauthenticity or health hazards, as PT27 does.

"Religious and Theological Topics and Knowledge"

The topic "Religious and Theological Topics and Knowledge" with 59 videos, is particularly distinctive. Unlike other topics that align our sample closely with mainstream content creators, the topics in this category stand out as unique to Muslims and bring their religious identity to the forefront. Videos in this category show Muslim practices, such as prayer, du'a, umrah, hajj, and deeds that are desirable according to Islamic ethics or related theological discussions. This topic suggests that female Muslim content creators on TikTok are establishing themselves as educators and advisors on religious topics, covering areas such as the permissibility of certain actions, jurisprudence, religious advice, spirituality, and Islamic history. One example is a video by couple PT24, where the husband asks several questions about the permissibility of actions allowed for women in Islam but not for men, while the wife responds:

> [...] Husband: "Am I, as a man, allowed to wear gold [touches his wrist] or a nice gold necklace like this"? [runs his hand along his neck, and turns to his wife]
>
> Wife: "No, that's something we as women are allowed to do [points to herself], but not you". [points to her husband and smiles.] [...]
>
> Husband: "Okay. And are we, as men, allowed to wear a nice silk shirt? Something really nice"? [mimics a shirt with his hands]
>
> Wife: "No, unfortunately not. Only we [points to herself] women are allowed to. You men are not allowed to do that either". [makes a dismissive hand gesture]
>
> Husband: "Alright. Are we as men allowed to just skip prayer or fasting, except when we're sick, of course, aside from that?"
>
> Wife: "No, you are not allowed. Only we women are allowed to do that, [points to herself] when we have our period".
>
> Husband: "Okay. What about Mahr [Arabic for dowry]? Are we also entitled to receive Mahr? Can I demand a Mahr from you? Like a car"? [gestures]
>
> Wife: "No [shakes her head], no, Mahr is something the woman demands from the man during the Islamic marriage, and the man has to fulfill it throughout his life". [raises finger]

Another example is PT26, who discusses relevant female historical figures and their impact on Islam in several of her videos. Notably, as shown in the examples, women occupy different positions in these videos. On the one side, they are the educators, providing knowledge—for instance, the wife providing answers to her husband's questions. On the other side, they reference women or womanhood directly, by showcasing significant female figures in Islamic history or highlighting the unique privileges women have in Islam that men do not have. Hereby, they challenge the misconception that men hold all the privileges in Islam. As a function of challenging these misconceptions, they are also addressing gender inequalities from an Islamic point of view. This commitment resonates with existing literature that identifies digital platforms as a "third space" that amplifies voices, especially in relationship to traditionally male-dominated fields such as theology (Nisa, 2021; Pennington, 2018b). Third spaces manifest as environments where Muslim women can explore and discuss Islam and their experiences from a variety of ideological standpoints—whether alternative, subversive, or orthodox (Pennington, 2018b).

Unlike one or two decades ago, when exchanging online was confined to more exclusive digital spaces like newsgroups, blogs, forums, or email lists, Muslim women are using TikTok to address a broader digital audience. This is a consequence of the fact that TikTok, like other contemporary social media platforms, has an imminent public. As a result, alternative and lesser-known readings of Islam, even those challenging cultural status quo and expectations, are amplified in the digital public realm as well and might even diffuse into the offline sphere. PT30 exemplifies this in one of her videos. On-screen, she places phrases that "they" tell us "us" (women), relating to the expectation that women should not participate or present themselves in public. She then contrasts these statements with on-screen texts arguing that during the time of the Prophet Muhammad, women worked, participated in politics, and prayed in mosques behind men. While challenging cultural expectations that persist in parts of the diaspora Muslim communities, she draws on Islamic sources to enhance the legitimacy and acceptance of her claim among a religious audience. The specific cultural expectation she challenges concerns the public presence of Muslim women and highlights an attitude among Muslim women that they do not accept the notion that they should be excluded from public life. The video itself, being public, reinforces her message and supports our argument about Muslim women joining public spaces to present and amplify their Islamic perspectives. As such, they are not merely exchanging ideas in secluded circles but are actively participating in shaping Islamic discourses. In doing so, they reinforce their roles as influential public speakers, contributing to Islamic knowledge production, while perhaps more pertinent to women, are crucial to the wider Muslim corpus. This resonates with earlier findings that highlight Muslim women's contribution to religious discourses online, and thus to increasing fragmentation and pluralization of religious authority (Bunt, 2018; Nisa, 2021).

An interesting contrasting example is found in the videos by PT31. Some of the content provides religious knowledge, but it is mostly blended with videos featuring male

preachers. This approach illustrates how male predominance in religious education can be reproduced as well. Thus, TikTok provides a social platform for a wide range of Muslim thoughts and Muslim positionalities and challenges the notion of Islam as a monolithic and static entity, both for the German mainstream and for Muslims themselves.

"Justice and Political Advocacy"

"Justice and Political Advocacy" identified in 50 videos, addresses issues such as (gendered) anti-Muslim racism, gender inequality, and experiences related to racism and misogyny. As an intersectionally marginalized group, Muslim women expose and counter experiences of discrimination and defamation unique to them or problematize other forms of social injustice and exclusion against other minorities. This engagement is particularly poignant in Germany, a non-Muslim majority country, where the lives of Muslim women are distinctly racialized and ethnicized (Erel, 2003; Yurdakul and Korteweg, 2021). Many of these women are first to third-generation migrants, who continually navigate the pervasive challenges of Islamophobia, racism, and gendered discrimination in their everyday lives. In one video, PT27 addresses a common trope directed at veiled Muslim women by first responding to the claim that headscarves do not belong in Germany, countering it by pointing out that Mary, the mother of Jesus, and nuns also wear headscarves. This example highlights the dual context in which justice and political advocacy topics emerge: the politicization of religion, with the headscarf serving as a gendered aspect of this issue and majority-minority dynamics. PT27's reference to Mary and nuns illustrates this by using examples that resonate primarily within Christian-majority contexts. PT27 is arguing from the perspective of a minority within a predominantly secular yet historically Christian society, aiming to make the hijab more relatable and acceptable in that context. Sharing anti-Muslim incidents and addressing (gendered) anti-Muslim racism serves two main functions: (a) coping with experiences of discrimination and exclusion on an individual level, as exemplified by PT14, who reenacts in one of her videos how she was treated as a foreigner without German language skills on a bus because she wore a hijab, despite being a German convert; and (b) raising awareness, building support, and fostering solidarity, as seen in PT27's response to claims that anti-Muslim racism does not kill, where she references the murder of Marwa El-Sherbini in Germany and writes "Say Her Name" at the end of the video as a symbol of political solidarity. Through referencing the "Say Her Name" movement, she ties the Islamophobic murder of Marwa El-Sherbini to the tradition of minority activism, which has utilized this phrasing to highlight and address violence against marginalized individuals, particularly Black women. Political solidarity is a prominent theme in the "Justice and Political Advocacy" videos and is not only tied to national contexts, with 11 videos focusing on Palestine in response to the atrocities following October 7th, 2024 (see Table 1.4).

The lived experiences presented in videos of these content creators highlight the multifaceted and often compounding realities faced by Muslim women, marked not by a singular form of marginalization, but by multiple, overlapping layers of it. This could include religion, gender, race, and migration, as exemplified in the 10 videos classified under "Postmigration." By advocating for and articulating ideals of justice across racial, ethnic, religious, and gender lines, Muslim women assert significant political roles online (Peterson, 2022). Through displaying their lived experiences, they actively challenge the societal assumptions that depict their lives as apolitical and passive.

"Hijab and Life as a Hijabi"

Recognizing that the hijab and the experience of being a veiled woman play a prominent role in the content produced by Muslim women content creators (39 videos) and that it continues to be one of the central issues shaping the lives of Muslim women, particularly in Western European contexts, we decided to create a separate category for it. This category includes videos that explicitly deal with the hijab as a main theme as well as videos that deal with the lived realities of hijabis. A frequently recurring theme is addressing and defending oneself against stereotyping, defamation, and the suppression of hijabs and hijab-wearing. This may include comedic responses to restrictions on abayas in France or niqabs in general, as seen with PT30, which shows how long skirts or face masks are allowed as long as they do not have a religious tie. PT27 and PT18 react to common stereotypes directed at hijabis in their daily lives. For example, PT27 highlights a common phrase hijabis often hear, that they would look nicer without a hijab, responding with the video's soundbite, "I'm sorry, I did not order a glass of your opinion." PT18 addresses several of these stereotypes in a skit, reenacting typical conversations she faces, like questions about how hot it must be under the hijab, or assumptions that she was forced to wear it by her husband or father, all of which she responds to with annoyance. An interesting example is provided by PT9, who reacts to supposedly feminist yet anti-Muslim statements that deny her legitimacy in fighting for women's rights while wearing a hijab. Statements include: "How can you fight for women's rights while wearing a headscarf?" "You support the oppression of women by wearing the headscarf." "You veiled women are destroying everything we have fought for in 100 years of feminism." She responds with an educational monolog, which is part of a broader set of videos offering educational content about the hijab. In another video, she explains that she wears the hijab for religious reasons, not to avoid the male gaze, similar to PT30's educational content on niqabs and burqas. A significant number of videos are also directed toward the creators' own community, addressing topics such as how to style the hijab, ridiculing the so-called "haram police" who criticize P10 for not wearing the hijab properly, or proudly sharing their decision to start wearing the hijab, as seen with PT19 and PT6. Being relatable to the experiences of fellow hijabis is prevalent in most of the videos mentioned and can be completely free of political context. For

example, PT10 humorously enacts the various types of ad-hoc head scarfs that hijabis put on when they suddenly need to open the door for the mail. Interestingly, the content within this category speaks to multiple audiences, highlighting the social pervasiveness of the topic, both for those veiled and those who are not. While the hijab continues to be associated with negative qualities, Muslim women present themselves with the hijab in a self-confident and sometimes even proud way, presenting it as an everyday item. In this sense, they both increase the visibility of the hijab, redefine it, and contribute to its normalization.

"Lived Religion"

In line with studies that trace the evolution and transformation of religion in contemporary societies, we distinguish between theology and lived religion—a term coined by scholars such as (Campbell, 2012). In contrast to theological discourses that refer to scriptural evidence, exegesis, religious scholars, and authorities, lived religion reflects the individual practice of religion in a particular context. In our case, "Lived Religion" (36 videos) covers aspects of daily Muslim life like religious practices including Hajj, Umrah, and Ramadan. Videos on that topic offer an immersion into the creators' private and social experiences, resulting in a religiously connoted version of the topic "Personal and Social Life." Within that category, we find videos like P21 documenting her Umrah pilgrimage, PT4 filming her visit to the mosque, PT7 and PT25 discussing their conversion in relation to their upbringing, their family's acceptance, or their partner, and PT26 listing and showcasing the "Muslim things" found in her office while giving a musically accompanied tour, including prayer mats, hijabs, the Quran, halal sweets, halal skincare, and Islamic literature.

"Self(re-)presentation"

"Self(re-)presentation" (14 videos) provides an intriguing insight into TikTok's culture of self-presentation, where creators showcase aspects of their personhood, whether through physical presence or elements of their lives that are uniquely identifiable with them. Typically, these videos feature displays of the self, ranging from simple, uncommented, and unlabeled selfie videos to introductions of one's personhood (name, interests, etc.). A significant number of these videos show the creator with no content other than themselves, styled up, making their physical appearance the only subject of the video. This includes videos from PT2, PT3, PT5, PT6, PT8, and PT15. While Abidin argues that during COVID-19, online fame in the "influencer industry" became less contingent on body image and more on discursive content and performance talent (2020, pp. 83–84), physical visibility remains a tradition in content production that we still observe with some creators. Consequently, the essence of the creator, whether through physical visibility or personal

information, often becomes the focal point of their videos, reflecting the inherent (self-)marketing dynamics of the platform, even when the presentation appears trivial. In this logic, the "Self(re-)presentation" topic manifests as the distillation of both the "Personal and Social Life" and "Beauty, Style, and Fashion" topics.

"Postmigration"

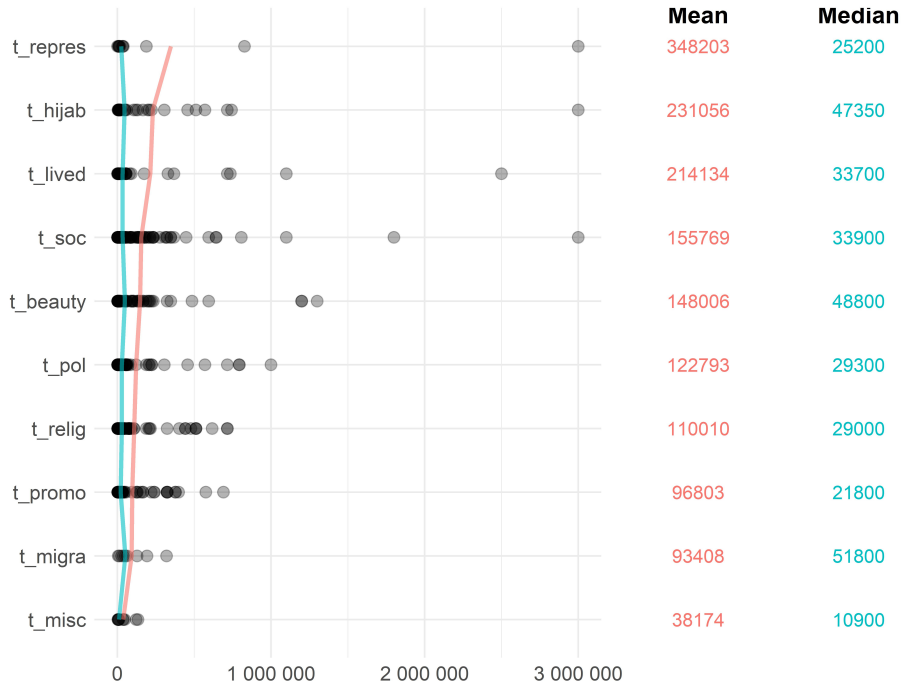
Postmigration refers to a reality fundamentally shaped by migration, where it has become the normal state of being. However, this status quo is contested, as seen in the denial of full and equal social participation to migrants and their descendants. The concept encompasses both the "normality of multiple belongings, mobility, and indefinite positionings" (Yildiz, 2019, p. 386) and the resistance and antagonism directed against this status quo (Foroutan, 2019). These dynamics are showcased in the respective topic (10 videos) in various ways, such as mentioning multiple origins, like PT8 or PT14. Often, done humorously, they display their struggles with speaking their parents' language, as seen with PT3, PT9, and PT10, or, conversely, their parents' struggle with speaking and learning German, like PT3. In a skit, acting as both an interviewer and an interviewee, she struggles to understand the interviewer in her parents' language (Turkish) and needs her mom's assistance. She refers to her as a "gurbetçi," a term used by Turks to describe other Turks living abroad, often implying a loss of language skills or an adaptation to life in a foreign country. Other examples include (migrant) parents' expectations toward their children, such as PT31, who does not want to marry a person of the same national background, or the challenges of explaining non-German cultural customs to Germans, like PT32. Additionally, there is the issue of dealing with non-German names being constantly mispronounced, to the point where people with these names, like PT29, adapt and introduce themselves using the common mispronunciation—though she also appreciates when people take the time to ask how to pronounce it correctly.

Topics with the Most Views

Videos on "Beauty, Style, and Fashion" and "Personal and Social Life" generate more views on average than videos on "Religious and Theological Topics and Knowledge" and "Justice and Political Advocacy" (see Figure 1.2). The high average views for the former two are likely skewed by outliers reaching over one and 3 million views, respectively, indicating how viral these topics can become. However, even the median number of views is lower for the latter two, leading us to speculate whether the inherently entertaining nature of beauty and social or personal content on TikTok may resonate more with the platform's affordances and audiences than serious topics like theology and political advocacy. However, particularly popular are videos that blend religion with social and private life, which is shown by the topics "Lived Religion" and "Hijab and Life as a Hijabi," which leans more toward entertainment. Such a blend of religiously connoted content

presented from a more entertaining perspective is visible in PT18's video, a humorous take on how close prayer times are to each other in winter. In fast-forward, she rolls out her prayer mat, performs her prayer, and just after packing up her things, the call to prayer sounds again. This content not only provides a unique element that distinguishes Muslim women from other content creators but also illustrates how TikTok serves as a platform for processing and sharing these experiences, often framed in terms of relatability to the shared experiences of Muslims.

Figure 1.2. Mean and median views per main topic



Topics such as political advocacy, religious teachings, lived religion, and hijab demonstrate that TikTok is more than just an entertainment platform; it is a space where personal, cultural, and political narratives blend, interact, and become public. This use of TikTok transcends information sharing; it fosters community building among like-minded individuals. Given TikTok's public nature, this is noteworthy. Muslim women on TikTok engage a specific audience by creating content that speaks to the intersectional experiences of Muslim women, or Muslims in general. TikTok's algorithm structures this engagement, as seen on its ForYouPage. There, the algorithm curates content based on viewers' interests, ensuring that each piece reaches an audience likely to find it relevant (Boeker and Urman, 2022). Through this feature, TikTok creates specific audiences by matching

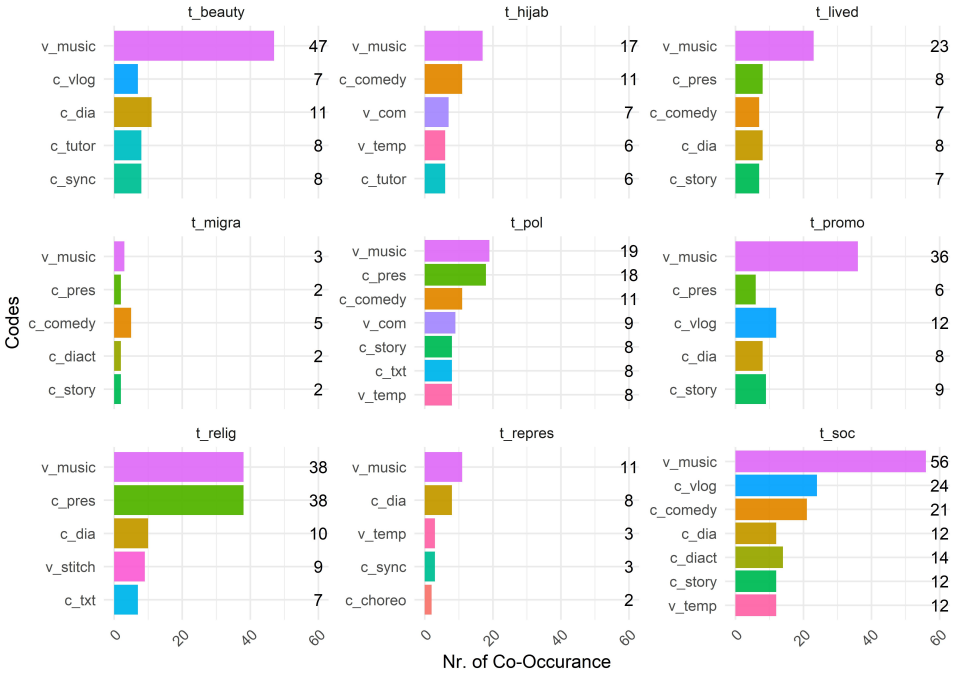
content with consumers. It is mediated by the relatability of content and shaped by TikTok's algorithms. This also allows content to spread and go viral, reaching a wider audience if it resonates with other people or the algorithm promotes it as relevant or trending. Communication on this platform is neither entirely public nor strictly private. While Muslim women engage a typical audience, their reach is public, which differs from their previous online presence as exclusive to specific communities described in previous literature (Nisa, 2021; Pennington, 2018b; Piela, 2010b, 2012). This marks a new mode of sociality for marginalized groups using TikTok and the like.

1.3.2. TikTok's Affordances: Video Formats

To further our understanding of TikTok's technical affordances, it is essential to investigate the video formats employed by creators. TikTok videos, like those on other social media platforms, are not only defined by their thematic content but also by how they are presented. Given the technical capabilities of TikTok, videos on this platform are shaped by the techniques available to content creators. As shown in Table 1.2, we can identify eight prominent video formats, which represent the technical features of TikTok the content creators in our sample use. Music is by far the most dominant video format (186 videos), referring to the ability to add music through the "sounds" feature, which allows creators to incorporate a specific audio file or use audio from another video. This video format co-occurs the most across all topics (see Figure 1.3), thus it is worth inspecting its role more intensely. The dominance of music may indicate two main functions: first, the artistic role of TikTok videos in enhancing or conveying the content and theme of a video. For example, one video uses a remix of Sam Smith and Kim Petras' song "Unholy," while PT2 poses for the camera in slow motion, attempting to convey seductiveness. Another video shows PT11 in natural scenery with a friend, discussing the importance of not rushing in life and emphasizing simple activities like reading a book or taking strolls in nature. To complement the tranquil setting and message of this video, the creator uses an instrumental song called "Snowfall" by øneheart x reidenshi. Music may also interact with other elements of the video, such as content type. In one video, PT8 introduces her interests, hobbies, and preferences by creating a slideshow of different pictures that showcase these interests. With each beat of the drum in the song "Run Boy Run" by Woodkid, the frame changes, creating a synergy between the song and the visuals. While this function seems general for TikTok users, it also occurs in a hybridized form for the Muslim case. In several instances, content creators use nasheed—Islamic songs and hymns—to emphasize religious content and enhance the overall religious atmosphere of the video. Upon examining the three songs mentioned, the nasheeds as well, it becomes clear that these songs are frequently and popularly used on TikTok to convey similar messages, emotional settings, or content types. Hence, as a second function, the use of music serves as both an inspiration to lend ideas from existing trends and a way to loop

one's content back into existing trends, increasing its visibility by associating it with trends that people frequently use or consume. This again highlights the marketability practices embedded in TikTok's inherent logic.

Figure 1.3. Co-occurrences of main topics with video formats and content types



See table 1.5 for label descriptions

The video format "Audio Templates" (32) showcases somewhat similar functionalities. Audio templates are sounds that, through their inherent dialogs or content, determine what the actor will do, given how they are commonly used or (re-)interpreted. PT4 demonstrates a typical application: she uses an extract from the movie "The Basketball Diaries" in which Leonardo DiCaprio describes how he gradually developed a drug addiction. This sound serves as an instruction to create your own rendition of how one developed a passion, addiction, or something similar. In this case, the creator describes step by step, transitioning away from listening to music. The audio plays while the text runs simultaneously, allowing her to reinterpret the content. Similarly, audio templates enable artistic interpretations and references to existing trends, much like music does. TikTok's affordances can be utilized for more interactive video formats, particularly

through "Reply (Comment)" (26) and "Stitches" (13). Both features allow interaction with other users' content: "Reply (Comment)" enables the use of viewer comments as a visual element in videos, fostering interaction with the viewership, while "Stitches" allows for combining and sequencing another user's content with your own videos, thereby creating interactions with other creators and possibly their audiences. Interactions can take different forms, as can comments from a creator's viewers.

While the "Reply (Comment)" functionality primarily fosters interactions with the audience, its specific use is shaped by the content of the comment itself. Comments can be positive and supportive, such as a viewer complimenting PT14, prompting her to thank the viewer for the kind words. They can be inquisitive, like a viewer asking PT9 why she wears the hijab, giving her an opportunity to explain her reason. These inquiries can come from within the Muslim community, such as a viewer asking PT23 a question related to Ramadan and fasting, to which she provides an answer based on Islamic jurisprudence. Replying to these comments can also create continuity and follow-ups with followers, such as PT3 being asked how she stays serious in her funny skits with her mother, leading to another video showing behind-the-scenes footage where they actually cannot stay serious. Similarly, PT12 follows up on a story that happened in a fast-food chain, elaborating on what viewers did not understand in the previous video. Comments can also be inherently negative. For example, PT9 responds to a comment delegitimizing activism for women's rights because she wears the hijab: "[…] Unfortunately, I still do not see how wearing a headscarf is compatible with feminism." Another example is a comment claiming that PT7's conversion was disingenuous, suggesting it was solely for her Muslim partner, and accusing her of having no prior knowledge of her previous religion, Christianity. In response, PT7 dissects this by sharing her upbringing in the Christian faith and clearly stating that her conversion was well-informed. While positive examples, such as inquisitive comments with educational replies or follow-ups, strengthen community building both within and outside the Islamic faith, the response to negative comments in our sample also highlights that the public visibility of Muslim women online can attract hate. However, many creators do not shy away from this hate or from the public space altogether; instead, they confront it directly and publicly. They confidently claim their space online and defend their presence, rather than resorting to seclusion.

"Image Blending" (13) and "Green Screening" (10) are techniques for including, using, or interacting with visual elements in one's video. The former enables the integration of visual elements, such as inserting pictures or small video clips, while the latter allows the user to map themselves into a picture or video, directly referencing what they wish to react or respond to. "Filters" (5) can be applied as face filters that modify one's appearance, for instance, to create caricatures, or as filters that enable other functionalities, such as games that can be controlled with facial motions.

1.3.3. Overlaps

The aforementioned examples show that the videos analyzed do not merely represent singular topics or formats but are defined by the interplay of different elements. Hence, to elicit patterns of content typically found amongst Muslim female content creators in Germany and what they tell us about the functionalities of TikTok for Muslim women in Germany as an intersectionally marginalized group, we need to aggregate the findings at the intersection of main topics, video formats, and content types. Overall, we recognize three overlaps:

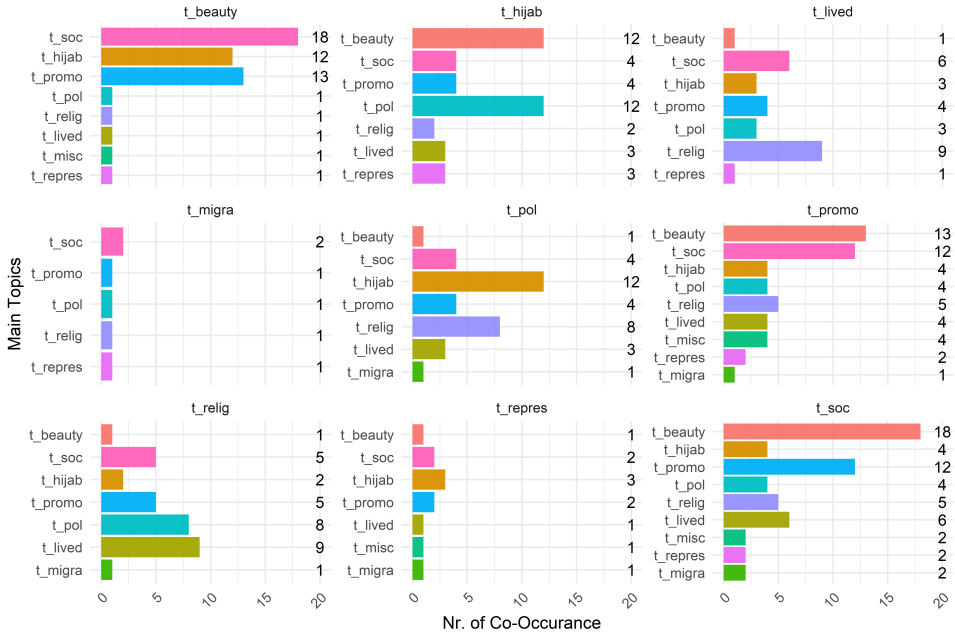
Vlogging for Aesthetic and Influence

As shown in Figure 1.4, three frequently co-occurring topics—"Beauty, Style, and Fashion," "Personal and Social Life," and "Promotion, Tips, Commerce, Inspiration"—form a meta-topic related to the consumer culture prevalent on TikTok, often driven by trends and personal branding. Notably, the first two topics correlate with higher average views in our sample, suggesting their alignment with what is popular on TikTok generally. Content types such as Vlogs (c_vlog), which immerse the viewer in the experiences of the creator, slideshows (c_dia) of pictures, comedic videos (c_comedy), lip-syncing songs (c_sync), or reenacting dialogs (c_diact), strongly correspond with these topics (see Figure 1.3). Particularly, vlogs and slideshows effectively showcase visual elements, which aligns well with the intent of these topics to display something. Both content types facilitate this purpose. All the mentioned content types have a visually engaging or entertaining aspect, matching well with the overall nature of the topics.

Political and Religious Advocacy

Two frequently co-occurring topics—"Religious and Theological Topics and Knowledge" and "Social Justice and Political Advocacy"—form what could be described as an advocacy meta-topic. As previously argued, political and religious subjects tend to be of a more serious nature. Therefore, presentations (c_pres) are frequently used as a content type and are the most commonly coded for these two topics. This content type is particularly suited for addressing complex issues and providing arguments, making it a key tool for educating and engaging audiences on serious topics. Some content creators strive to be more innovative and engaging in their approach, such as the previously mentioned video by PT24, where one partner asks the other questions about Islamic rulings. The response is delivered in a more upbeat and engaging manner, aiming to make Islamic education and information less dry and appear less stern. Overall, these overlaps indicate a content pattern that is more information-based and serious in nature, likely facilitated by content forms, such as presentations, that are well-suited for transmitting detailed information and arguments.

Figure 1.4. Co-occurrences between main topics



See table 1.5 for label descriptions

Playful Activism and Fashionable Religion

The co-occurrence of topics, video formats, and content types reveals overlaps that transcend the previously mentioned dichotomy of serious advocacy versus entertaining lifestyle content. We observe topics that frequently intersect with both lifestyle and advocacy themes, such as "Hijab and Life as a Hijabi" and "Lived Religion." The presence of both aspects in these topics is particularly intriguing. "Lived Religion," for example, is inherently a hybrid, blending religious themes with a more everyday, life-world perspective. This topic melds social and private content with religious elements, which, as noted earlier, has proven to be successful in terms of viewership.

"Hijab and Life as a Hijabi" is especially striking in its topical co-occurrence, resonating strongly with both "Beauty, Style, and Fashion" and "Social Justice and Political Advocacy." The pairing of these three topics highlights the politicization of the hijab and the experiences of hijabi women. It showcases their encounters with discrimination and marginalization, while also presenting the hijab as an object of beauty, beautification, and modest fashion, tying it to the fashion market and industry (Islam, 2023; Karakavak and Özbölük, 2022).

Contrasts are visible not only in how topics are paired but also in the varying content types associated with these topics. Both "Lived Religion" and "Hijab and Life as a Hijabi" are connected with comedic content types (c_comedy). However, "Lived Religion" also frequently uses presentation formats, while "Hijab and Life as a Hijabi" also engages with the audience of Muslim women through tutorials (c_tutor). This contrast between entertaining, informative, and instructional content highlights how these topics are approached both seriously and in an amusing manner by Muslim women.

Similarly, "Social Justice and Political Advocacy" also co-occurs frequently with comedic content types. This is notable, as it demonstrates that serious subjects, such as racism, anti-Muslim racism, and misogyny, are not only explored intellectually but also humorously. This approach provides a coping and defense mechanism, allowing for engagement with these weighty societal issues through humor, satire, and comedy, effectively breaking the seriousness of these topics (Wills and Fecteau, 2016). A very fitting example is a video by the couple PT25, in which they reply to a comment, "Reply (Comment)," that derogatorily called the wife's hijab a carpet. Satirically, the woman wears a carpet on her head, laughs, and dances while telling her husband that this is the new style invented by this user. Eventually, the husband then creates an insulting pun based on the username of that comment.

1.4. Discussion

Our findings show that Muslim female content creators produce a variety of content ranging from topics related to their social and personal lives, beauty, style and fashion, product promotion, commerce, tips and inspiration, religious and theological content, and knowledge, to social justice and political advocacy, lived religion and self(re-)presentation. While TikTok's technical features have a specific and intended purpose, they are imbued with meaning by Muslim women who creatively use them to fit their needs and experiences. By combining certain video formats with topics relevant to them, they create actual functions (or functionalities) for these video formats, which might be political advocacy, marketing, or (religious) education. While TikTok offers content creators new ways of (self-)representation and expression, our analysis suggests that the particular choice of video format and content type depends very much on the nature of the content itself, the logics and technical affordances of the media platform, and current trends. In the pursuit of virality, content creators are increasingly required to produce novel, unique, and engaging content that is affective and relatable to a broad audience. This could change the way Muslim women represent and express themselves on TikTok and even determine their choice of content.

While a significant portion of the videos relate to religion in one way or another, most of the data analyzed covers social and personal life issues and beauty. As such, Muslim

women's online behavior follows general TikTok usage patterns, revealing a primacy of the secular and mundane.

One issue that stands out and might be considered exclusive to Muslim women is the hijab, highlighting the intersectional life experiences of Muslim women. While problematizing the stereotyping of the hijab and consequently of hijabi women in mainstream discourses, Muslim women self-consciously invoke the multiple meanings and experiences of the hijab. They often refer to the hijab in a humorous or self-ironic way, share reflections on the issue of the hijab, or present the hijab as a (marketable) fashion item. In some cases, internal Muslim discourses on the hijab and the regulation of women's bodies and behaviors are challenged or rejected. In this sense, Muslim women use TikTok as a third space that allows for non-hegemonic interpretations of the hijab and contributes to the normalization of the hijab within non-Muslim majority contexts. While the issue itself may not resonate with mainstream discourses on TikTok, it can be disseminated through creative and innovative forms of representation that align with the entertaining nature of the platform. Using music and humor, politically charged and socially ostracized issues can be subverted and made more relatable to a broader audience. However, in line with previous research, our study suggests that Muslim female content creators experience hate and harassment as a result of their increased visibility (Allen, 2015; Chadha et al., 2020). This often manifests itself in derogatory speech that reproduces stereotypical narratives of (veiled) Muslim women and contests their presence online. As indicated in our findings section, Muslim women have developed coping strategies in response to hateful comments and discourses using TikTok's technical affordances. In this sense, TikTok could both increase the vulnerability of Muslim women and provide them with tools to counter their marginalization and discrimination.

While TikTok facilitates the transmission of religious knowledge and theological debate, making Muslim women more visible as religious educators, it also opens space for sharing insights into lived religion. As Aguilar et al. (2017) point out, there is a trend toward lived religion in the digital realm, making visible diverse religious beliefs, expressions, and practices that challenge the monolithic image of Islam in favor of a fragmented, contingent notion of religion. However, previous research (Hasan, 2022) and our study confirm that social media, including TikTok, favor simple religious representations, reducing complex discourses to questions of permissibility or rules. Thus, platform logics shape religious representation, knowledge transmission, and content choices. Female content creators on TikTok are increasingly shaping theological debates. While contributing to the pluralization of interpretations and promoting non-traditional Islamic discourses, Muslim women on TikTok also reinforce orthodox interpretations and traditional authorities. This supports earlier findings that highlight both the fragmentation of religious authorities and the strengthening of traditional scholarship through digital means (Bunt, 2018; Nisa, 2021).

As our study has shown, Muslim women content creators are just as concerned with

the issues and problems of everyday life as their peers. To substantiate this claim and demonstrate the specificity of Muslim women on TikTok, further research should contrast our findings with non-Muslim women and Muslim men. Such comparisons would help identify differences and assess the importance of gender and religion in TikTok content creation. To fully understand TikTok's role for marginalized groups like Muslim women, future studies should examine creator-audience interaction. This is crucial for assessing the reach and influence of Muslim women content creators. Additionally, cross-platform analysis could reveal how TikTok differs from other platforms.

In line with previous research on Muslim women online (Hirji, 2021; Nisa, 2021; Piela, 2010a), it is clear that Muslim women have not only become more visible on social media but have also managed to gain recognition within their communities and, in some cases, beyond, by self-consciously enacting their hybrid identities. While some Muslim women achieve reach with marketable topics on TikTok, videos reflecting their unique experiences have limited reach. Thus, the marginalization of Muslim women is reproduced digitally. This aligns with existing literature that critiques how power hierarchies are perpetuated in digital spaces as well (Simões et al., 2023). However, with the increasing normalization of Islam and Muslim life in Europe through the engagement of Muslim women, we might expect a shift in the perception and treatment of previously marginalized issues and their incorporation into mainstream discourses and policies.

1.A Appendix

Table 1.3. Main topics and their respective subtopics and frequency (n)

Pseudonym	Account Type	Account Status (as of July 2024)	Avg.Views per Video	Follower (as of November 2024)
PT1	Solo	Available	47207	49900
PT2	Solo	Available	228687	229000
PT3	Solo	Available	350145	526400
PT4	Solo	Available	24230	23300
PT5	Solo	Available	47597	108000
PT6	Solo	Available	110327	48200
PT7	Couple	Available	8239	18600
PT8	Solo	Available	567998	715600
PT9	Solo	Available	213726	116800
PT10	Solo	Available	314831	87000
PT11	Solo	Available	68362	34800
PT12	Solo	Available	48530	33900
PT13	Solo	Available	119829	29400
PT14	Solo	Available	101540	116700
PT15	Solo	Available	515572	386600
PT16	Solo	Available	110054	65800
PT17	Solo	Renamed	94434	59600
PT18	Solo	Renamed	410494	2200000
PT19	Solo	Renamed	355920	268500
PT20	Solo	Available	22036	31200
PT21	Solo	Available	2810	31200
PT22	Solo	Available	67839	470500
PT23	Solo	Available	9882	39700
PT24	Couple	Renamed	785314	241800
PT25	Couple	Available	42202	131000
PT26	Solo	Available	166752	66300
PT27	Solo	Available	12757	15200
PT28	Solo	Available	353478	296600
PT29	Solo	Available	214248	151500
PT30	Solo	Not Available	50620	13700
PT31	Solo	Not Available	228805	82200
PT32	Solo	Available	175833	556000

Table 1.4. Main topics and their respective subtopics and frequency (n)

Main Topic	Subtopics	n
(Post)Migration		10
Beauty, Style, and Fashion		70
Lived Religion	Religious Life/Practices	14
	Ramadan	11
	Umrah/Hajj	9
	Conversion	3
Hijab and Life as a Hijabi		39
MISC		11
Personal and Social Life	Partnership	50
	Travel/Living Abroad/Vacation	16
	Friendship	12
	Family/Siblings/Parents	11
	School/University Life	7
	Leisure Time	6
	Private Life	6
	Embarrassing Moments	4
	Growing Up	3
	Dance/Choreo	3
	Lifestyle	3
	Event Impressions	2
	Poetry Slam	1
Promotion, Tips, Commerce, Inspiration	Haul/Unboxing/Showing Products	18
	Self-Care	13
	Tipps/Inspirations	11
	Food Vlog/Restaurants	9
	Affiliated Marketing	5
	Promotion	5
	Consumer Protection	5
	Recipes	5
	DIY/Home Renovation & Decoration	4

Main Topic	Subtopics	n
Religious and Theological Topics and Knowledge	Religious Advice/Motivation/Nasiha/Reminders	41
	Religious Education	33
	Halal/Haram	4
Self(re-)presentation		14
Social Justice and Political Advocacy	Gendered Anti-Muslim Racism/Islamophobia	16
	Feminism	15
	Palestine	11
	Anti-Muslim Racism/Islamophobia	7
	Fundraising/Charity/Petition	4
	Media Critique	4
	Racism	3
	Gendered Racism	2

Each subtopic is counted once per video

Table 1.5. Main codes and their short codes

Main Code	Short Code
(Post)Migration	t_migra
Beauty, Style, and Fashion	t_beauty
Personal and Social Life	t_soc
Religious and Theological Topics and Knowledge	t_relig
Promotion, Tips, Commerce, Inspiration	t_promo
Social Justice and Political Advocacy	t_pol
Lived Religion	t_lived
Hijab and Life as a Hijabi	t_hijab
Self(re-)presentation	t_repres
MISC	t_misc
Comedy	c_comedy
Diashow/Image sequence	c_dia
Vlog Formats/Impressions	c_vlog
Presentation	c_pres
Text-Commented Video	c_txt
Storytteling	c_story
Dialogue/Acting	c_diact
Singalong	c_sync
Dance/Choreography	c_choreo
Tutorial	c_tutor
Speakalong	c_speak
Cooking Show	c_cook
Challenge	c_chal
Poetry Slam	c_poet
Singing	c_sing
Interview	c_inter
Music	v_music
Audio Templates	v_temp
Reply (Comment)	v_com
Image Blending	v_pic
Green Screening	v_green
Stitch	v_stitch
Filter	v_filt
Slideshow	v_slide

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Chapter 2

Exploring (Anti-)Radicalism on TikTok: German Islamic Content Creators between Advocacy and Activism

Nader Hotait and Rami Ali

Abstract

This study explores the representation of radical and anti-radical ideologies among German Islamic TikTok creators, analyzing 2983 videos from 43 accounts through qualitative content analysis. The results reveal two main content clusters: religious practice involving social/lifestyle issues and political activism around Muslim grievances. Victimization, found in 150 videos, was the most common indicator associated with radicalization and emerged as a source of political activism and subversive discourse. Overall, indicators of radicalism were scarce, suggesting that visible mainstream Islamic creators do not exhibit high levels of radical ideology. However, this also reflects a selection bias in the design of this study, which systematically overlooks fringe actors. In addition, religious advocacy was the most common topic (1144 videos), serving as a source of guidance and motivation, but was occasionally linked to sectarianism and rigid religious interpretations. Male creators posted more religious/theological videos; female creators posted more lifestyle videos. However, gender distinctions are limited due to the low representation of female creators (6). Some topics, such as the hijab, served as an intersection between religious practice and politicized narratives. This study highlights TikTok's role in promoting

diverse ideological views and shaping community engagement, knowledge sharing, and political mobilization within Germany's Muslim digital landscape.

This chapter was published in *Religions* (Hotait and Ali, 2024). The version presented here differs only in minor changes to section titles for overall coherence, table and figure formatting, and correction of grammatical errors.

2.1. Introduction

At a time when digital platforms are shaping social discourse, TikTok has emerged as a prominent platform, attracting ubiquitous audiences to its fold. TikTok's sharp rise in popularity in recent years not only highlights its attractive design and entertaining nature but also underscores how users find representation and a sense of belonging within the platform's communities (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022; Hiebert and Kortes-Miller, 2023; Schellewald, 2023). Marginalized groups in particular use TikTok to build virtual communities and exchange insights about their identities and experiences, addressing their marginalization and injustices (Cervi and Divon, 2023; Delmonaco et al., 2024; Eriksson Krutrök and Åkerlund, 2023; Hiebert and Kortes-Miller, 2023; Vizcaíno-Verdú and Aguaded, 2022). This dynamic is particularly visible for minorities within majority contexts. One such minority group is German Muslims. As an intersectionally marginalized group—affected by factors such as religion, gender, ethnicity, and race due to the migration background of many members—German Muslims experience widespread discrimination and social exclusion (Di Stasio et al., 2021; Fernández-Reino et al., 2023; Lewicki and Shooman, 2020). In addition, public discourses render German Muslims highly visible and associate them with various emotions, including fear (Schiffauer, 2006; Wigger, 2019). These dynamics add layers of complexity to the challenges faced by German Muslims as they navigate their multiple identities and search for belonging. As a minority, they have to manage daily life in an environment where their cultural and religious practices are alienated and problematized. Moreover, they find themselves under constant scrutiny—visible but often ignored, with their needs, grievances, and the complexities of their lives largely unrecognized.

This situation is not unique to German Muslims. Many Western Muslims, particularly in Europe and North America, find themselves in a similar juxtaposition of hypervisibility and marginalization (Pratt and Woodlock, 2016). This has created a need for spaces where they can explore and navigate their identities.

Since the advent of the Internet, Western Muslims, including German Muslims, have turned to online spaces for entertainment and lifestyle purposes similar to their peers, as well as to engage with their hybrid identities and experiences, creating and organizing communities that reflect their cultural and religious idiosyncrasies (Piela, 2012; Rozehnal, 2022). This makes studies on Muslim representation online particularly intriguing, as they reflect inherent trends and logics of social media, such as entertainment and lifestyle content while incorporating unique aspects of religion and identity specific to Muslim communities.

The demographic profile of social media platforms, particularly TikTok, whose user base includes a significant number of young people (Bestvater, 2024; Koch, 2023), aligns well with the predominantly young demographic of German Muslims; 43% of German Muslims are 24 and younger (Pfündel et al., 2021, p. 4). This means that a significant

proportion of German Muslims belong to the age groups typical of digital natives, primarily Generation Z and Generation Alpha. This demographic alignment underscores the high potential for social and political mobilization of German Muslims through these platforms. Furthermore, it indicates that German Muslim youth are particularly well positioned to use TikTok for a variety of purposes, ranging from cultural–religious expression to socio-political advocacy.

Despite the prominent presence and active participation of Muslim content creators on social media, and the wide range of topics they cover, from presenting modest fashion to negotiating Islamic identity in Western contexts (Duffy and Hund, 2015; Echchaibi, 2013; Hasan, 2022; Wheeler, 2014; Zaid et al., 2022), here is a noticeable gap in systematic academic research focusing on this group in the context of TikTok and Germany.

However, there is growing interest and literature about TikTok as a hub for extremist content and a facilitator of radicalism. In fact, TikTok has not been immune to the emergence of radical actors. Various research has identified extremist content on TikTok from various ideological backgrounds, including political and religious extremism (Little and Richards, 2021; O'Connor, 2021). As digital landscapes become the new frontier for ideological struggles, TikTok has also become a channel for radical German actors seeking new audiences (Hartwig and Hänig, 2022). These actors skillfully navigate digital currents to disseminate content designed to convince their audiences of their worldview and prescriptions, i.e., to radicalize them. Exposure to extremism through well-targeted communication is fundamental to the radicalization process and lays the groundwork for the spread of radical ideologies. Arguably, equally important is the interplay of factors such as demography, individual psychosocial make-up, and the wider socio-political context, each of which plays a significant role in an individual's susceptibility to extremist ideas (Booth et al., 2024; Kruglanski and Webber, 2014; McGilloway et al., 2015). This creates a multifaceted matrix that is often, but not always, observed in those who become radicalized (Campelo et al., 2018). What is essential, however, is the compelling and persuasive nature of radical ideologies communicated by extremist actors, which ultimately convinces and ensnares individuals to adopt extremist thinking (Awan, 2017; Vergani et al., 2020).

As part of the "pull factors" within radicalization, radical communication often appeals to individuals by addressing their deep-seated psychological needs, such as meaning, social recognition, identity, belonging, closure, and purpose (Pfundmair et al., 2024). The potency of their propaganda lies in the capitalization on vulnerability, offering a sense of clarity and community to those struggling with societal or personal grievances. Radical groups seek to captivate individuals, in part, through narratives that are congruent with the private histories or perceived injustices of their target audiences. Just as some Muslims use TikTok to find representation and process issues specific to their experiences in Germany, such as discrimination or the search for religious guidance appropriate to their lived realities, content creators have emerged who resonate with these needs and grievances. These creators are producing videos on these issues, and some are also po-

sitioning themselves as authorities on religious guidance (Hartwig, Seelig, et al., 2023). However, a fraction of German Islamic content creators often use these interactions to offer objectionable solutions and advice, targeting the platform's predominantly young user base.

Despite its relevance, there is a notable gap in academic research on radical communication on TikTok, particularly in the German context and in relation to Muslim audiences. Currently, existing academic research on religious extremism on TikTok in Germany can generally be divided into two approaches: monitoring projects that provide overviews of the activities of various actors (e.g., Hartwig and Hänig, 2022), and in-depth, mostly qualitative analyses of specific actors (e.g., Ali et al., 2023). Both approaches often, but not exclusively, focus on content creators who have previously gained notoriety on other social media platforms. Comprehensive and comparative research on online content creation by Muslim creators in Germany, especially studies that combine both of these approaches and focus specifically on TikTok, remains limited. However, given TikTok's unique technical capabilities and affordances, it is important to further explore the platform and tailor research designs to these characteristics. In the case of online radicalization through exposure to extremist material, TikTok has some interesting characteristics that merit attention for research.

TikTok, like other platforms, recommends content based on a user's presumed interests. However, TikTok's approach to content curation, as evidenced by its "For You" page, differs from the norm in that it does not prioritize followers as much (TikTok, 2020; Zhang and Liu, 2021). The visibility of accounts on TikTok depends less on the number of followers they have and more on the popularity, engagement, and relevance of their content. Liking and following certain users significantly influence the content suggested by TikTok's algorithm (Boeker and Urman, 2022). However, unlike Instagram or YouTube, the For You page interface on TikTok is not designed to show a feed of posts in chronological order by followed accounts. This results in a user experience that is inherently less continuous, coherent, or chronological in terms of content from followed accounts. As a result, it can be argued that viewers contextualize videos not in a strict sequence of posts from folloed accounts, but as a collection of individual pieces that, while recognizably patterned, are experienced in a seemingly non-linear rather than sequential order. Given that current research often comes with extensive prior knowledge of specific actors, there is a tendency to interpret content with a depth of context that the average viewer may not share, as their experience on the platform is less actor-focused and perhaps less in-depth. This suggests that each TikTok video may be more effectively analyzed as an individual entity, rather than as part of a collective narrative tied to the creator.

Most importantly, the prevalence of anti-radical content—material that constitutes the exact opposite of extremist narratives and potentially has a preventive, rather than radicalizing, effect—receives little to no attention in the current literature on online radicalization. To thoroughly assess the potential for radicalization on TikTok from

the creator's perspective, one must consider the contrast—the presence of messages that could have a countering or preventive narrative. An oversimplification can obscure the complexities of engagement with radical content, including the potential for anti-radical messages to help prevent radicalization, or instances where known radical actors may also disseminate positive messages. The latter is crucial, as extremist recruitment could use inherently positive messages as an entry point into more radical ideologies. Understanding radicalism in this context requires contrasting analysis with anti-radical narratives that address the same themes or issues from opposite perspectives, highlighting the range of framing possibilities for certain phenomena. In light of this existing research gap, this study aims to improve the understanding of (anti-)radical content within the German Muslim TikTok community. More specifically, the focus is on German Muslim content creators who produce Islamic content, as opposed to those who identify as Muslim but do not produce religious content at all. It is guided by two research questions:

1. What are the different radical and anti-radical contents presented in the videos of German Islamic TikTok creators?

2. What topics are frequently associated with radical or anti-radical content within this community, and how do these associations shape the narratives of German Islamic TikTok videos?

This research offers a new systematic categorization of (anti-)radical content, applying a multidimensional approach to radicalism. By analyzing individual videos, our study focuses on their apparent meaning as standalone units, rather than attributing meaning by extrapolating from other content. This approach aims to replicate the perspective of an average TikTok user encountering and interpreting each video independently on their ForYou page for their apparent content. Such an approach contrasts with analyses that interpret videos as reflective of a creator's overall ideology, often seeking more subtle and subliminal patterns. Arguably, this approach is more restrictive because it avoids assuming associations between videos, which may in fact occur. However, we argue that this analytical strategy allows for a closer approximation of how content is perceived, given the affordances of the ForYou page. Additionally, this study focuses on popular accounts with significant followings. This brings an ambivalence to this study; for one, it definitely causes a selection bias that given content moderation the fringes of problematic content could be overlooked, but at the same time, it allows us to analyze the content produced in the German Islamic TikTok mainstream, which we argue is more representative of the experience of this user demographic.

Furthermore, this study identifies the topics presented in these videos. Identifying topics not only provides an overview of the discourses prevalent among content creators but also allows for the reconstruction of the associations between (anti-)radical content and the topics typically addressed with them. The identification of both topics and

(anti-)radical content is achieved through the qualitative coding of 2983 videos from 43 accounts, which is subsequently quantified to determine the prevalence of coded elements and their combinations. We also collected the metadata on each video, such as likes, views, shares, comments, and the use of hashtags and video descriptions. These data help to contextualize our sampled videos within the broader performance metrics on TikTok, offering insights into the impact of actors and videos.

To present the central findings of our research, we structure this paper as follows: Initially, we present our methodology, detailing the sampling and coding strategies employed. Our findings are then discussed in four subsections. The first, "Victimization, Grievances, and Political Action", focuses on content that portrays Muslims as victims or recipients of grievances, analyzing narratives of victimhood and the associated political positions. The second subsection, "Religious Advocacy, Everyday Life, and Guidance", explores the discourse on religious guidance and ideological differences within Muslim communities. Given the centrality of the headscarf debate in the qualitative findings of the first and second subsections, a distinct third subsection providing a qualitative summary of the headscarf debate in our data is designated ("The Headscarf Debate: A Spectrum of Reactions"). The fourth subsection, "Topics, Popularity, and Gender", examines how different topics are approached by various genders and their effectiveness in generating reach. Both the first and second subsections will be presented using both summaries and examples. These will include analyses of the co-occurrence of (anti-)radical content and various topics, as well as qualitative examples. Our paper concludes with a discussion that synthesizes our approach and findings, offers implications for future research, and highlights the socio-political relevance of this study. In doing so, we contribute to the scholarly discourse on online radicalism, content creation, and digital Muslims and Islamic studies. By providing a nuanced and comprehensive approach, we offer insights into how different religious and political ideas are presented through short-form video content. Through this endeavor, this study fills a crucial gap in the limited systematic data available on Muslim users on TikTok. Not only does it provide valuable insights into the existence, diversity, and framing of political and religious content, but it also offers a foundation for future research to explore this field further. Additionally, the findings are relevant from a socio-political standpoint, helping to guide actionable approaches based on the data presented.

2.2. Data and Methods

2.2.1. Sampling Strategy

The data for this study consists of a retrospective collection of all videos from 2022 from the sampled accounts. The sampling process, which began in early 2023, was designed to identify Muslim TikTok accounts that produce content explicitly referencing the

Islamic religion or religious themes. This focus narrows the research to concentrate on religious ideologies and identities associated with Islam or being Muslim, rather than encompassing all the values and beliefs held by self-identifying Muslims, even when there is no reference to their Muslim identity or Islamic heritage. The initial phase involved querying TikTok videos using search terms that combined "Islam" or "Muslim" with "Deutsch" or "German". We then included the accounts that posted videos related to Islam or being Muslim in a German context. Videos and accounts suggested by TikTok's search options are typically those that are trending or popular for a given term, aligning with our intent to focus on the mainstream and prominent actors of Muslim TikTok in Germany. This served as a proxy for what is commonly consumed within that digital domain.

This strategy was a precursor to a snowball sampling approach, which was integral to expanding the sample. Reviewing each account led to the utilization of TikTok's suggestion feature, which recommends similar users—usually three—providing a pathway to additional accounts for potential inclusion. This cumulative process continued until new accounts no longer significantly contributed to the diversity or relevance of the sample. Moreover, the sample was enhanced by including accounts labeled in prior research as radical or extremist (see Hartwig and Hänig, 2022; Hartwig, Seelig, et al., 2023). The inclusion of these accounts was necessary to capture central figures in the German discourse on religious extremism, maintaining a comprehensive sample for this study. Initially, the sampling procedure yielded around 150 accounts. To ensure that the resulting data are practical for analysis, we limited the timeline of videos for each account to 2022. Limiting the data to that year allowed us to establish a timeframe that ensured overlap in content creation between the accounts. As online content creators, including Muslims, frequently engage with and comment on current events relevant to their identities (Ali et al., 2023), this approach enabled the inclusion of multiple perspectives on the same trends or events. To ensure inclusion of accounts actively producing content in 2022, we established a criterion requiring at least four videos posted within the year.

Our snowball sampling naturally yielded German-speaking accounts, and those where German was not the primary language were excluded. This decision was made to focus on content specifically catered to a German-speaking audience, acknowledging that this may have excluded some German actors producing content in other languages. Additionally, a few accounts based in Austria or Switzerland, as indicated by the profile or self-identification in the content, were removed to maintain this study's focus on the German national context. However, since nationality was not systematically measured, this process is not entirely free of potential error. Nonetheless, when qualitatively coding all videos from 2022, no Austrian or Swiss context emerged from any account that did not explicitly mention being based in Germany. This process, combined with the substantive criterion that accounts must regularly produce Islamic or Muslim content, defined as content that includes Islam as a religion, religious doctrines, or being Muslim from

accounts that self-identify as Muslim, our strategy refined the sample to 43 accounts (see Table 2.1 and Table 2.5). In this context, "regularly" refers to accounts that engage with Islamic topics or discussions on multiple occasions throughout their active period, rather than in isolated or singular instances. These accounts were subsequently used for data collection and underwent a qualitative analysis of their video postings from the year 2022.

Table 2.1. Sample description

Gender	Accounts	Videos	Avg.Videos*	Avg.Views*	Avg.Likes*
All	43	2983	69	11.3 M	962.9 K
couple	2	131	66	107.5 M	6.7 M
female	6	406	68	7.3 M	645.6 K
male	33	2345	71	6.6 M	677.1 K
unknown	2	101	50	5.4 M	907.9 K

* Per account

As might be expected, our study faced several limitations, in addition to the selection bias caused by purposefully selecting popular accounts given our substantive interest. Firstly, there was a considerable variance in the volume of videos across the sampled accounts, leading to unequal representation. Secondly, the feasibility of qualitative analysis was challenged by accounts with an extensive number of videos, some reaching into the hundreds or thousands in 2022. For those accounts, we employed a random sampling strategy, selecting an equal number of videos each month during their active periods. This approach capped the total number of videos at no more than 160 per account. Lastly, the temporal activity of the accounts was not uniform, causing disparities in the representation of time-sensitive events or factors. This irregularity in account activity posed constraints on drawing evenly distributed conclusions across different time frames (see Figure 2.3 and Figure 2.4). The total number of videos from our 2022 sample amounted to 2983.

2.2.2. Data Collection

The data collection for this study was structured in two sequential phases, involving web scraping and professional transcription services. In the first phase, web scraping was employed to extract data from all 2983 videos posted in 2022 across the 43 TikTok accounts. This process involved collecting metrics such as video URLs, titles, posting dates, durations, and engagement statistics such as views, likes, comments, and shares, along with audio file titles, hashtags, and video descriptions. After completing the web scraping, we proceeded to the second phase: each video posted in 2022 was systematically downloaded and submitted for a verbatim transcription via "abtipper.de". The service involved a detailed transcription of both the audio and visual elements of the videos. Audio content was transcribed verbatim, while visual elements such as on-screen text, gestures,

facial expressions, and relevant background imagery were described in detail. Focusing on transcribing both auditory and visual content was crucial, as these transcriptions provided the primary foundation for subsequent data analysis, guaranteeing that no potential message or communication was overlooked. The transcribed material was carefully matched with the scraped data using the unique video ID from each TikTok link.

2.2.3. Analysis and Coding

In the qualitative analysis of the collected data, a hybrid coding procedure integrating deductive and inductive techniques was employed. The deductive component drew upon theoretical frameworks in areas such as radicalism, radicalization, extremism, (religious) fundamentalism, and dogmatism, and theories around closed-mindedness, value complexity, and closure. After reviewing the relevant literature, a list of indicators for radicalism was deduced (see Table 2.6), which includes indicators on the following:

1. Behavioral extremism and radicalization: this encompasses the choice of means to achieve ideological goals, ranging from violence or jihadism to non-extremist actions like legal political activism (Peels, 2023, p. 3; Cassam, 2021, 61 ff; Moskalenko and McCauley, 2009; Moghaddam, 2005, p. 165; Hegghammer, 2014; Wibisono et al., 2019; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017, p. 212);

2. Cognitive extremism and radicalization: this relates to the beliefs, attitudes, and values adopted, such as religious monism, authoritarian or violent theology, sectarianism or takfirism, dichotomization ("us-them"), dehumanization, and delegitimizing the present socio-political status quo or system (Moghaddam, 2005, pp. 163–165; Peels, 2023, pp. 3, 5–6; McCauley and Moskalenko, 2017, pp. 211–212; Cassam, 2021, 39 ff; Hegghammer, 2014; Wibisono et al., 2019; Kruglanski, 2004);

3. Conative extremism and radicalization: this pertains to the specific aspirations of actors, for example, re-establishing past governments and dynasties, like the Ottoman Empire, or overthrowing the current government (Hegghammer, 2014; Wibisono et al., 2019).

Indicators of anti-radicalism, such as videos that exemplify phenomena opposing those associated with radicalism and are therefore linked to countering or preventing it, are based on the same factors. The list of radicalism indicators includes "victimization", which refers to narratives of victimization involving Muslims or Muslim nations. While this indicator is not inherently indicative of radicalism or extremism, it is included here as a potential facilitator. Existing research suggests that perceived in-group injustice and discrimination have an effect on radicalization, or at least are more prevalent among

those with radical ideologies (Emmelkamp et al., 2020). However, it is important to note that discussions of victimhood are also a part of regular public discourse and political debate, particularly for marginalized groups. In general, many of these codes alone do not constitute unambiguous radicalism; rather, in combination, they form a specific message that could be classified as such.

We are adopting dominant scholarly debates here that may fall within the lens of a state-security perspective, focusing on violent, illegal, or anti-constitutional behavior, or structural definitions that emphasize socially relevant elements of extremism, generally or specifically for one religion. However, some elements reflect a discourse that arbitrarily targets Muslims. Monism—an understanding of religion that denies pluralism and promotes a monolithic view of faith—is, to some extent, inherent to religion itself, as many religions claim a singular way of understanding the world. In our case, we have coded this from the perspective of the Islamic faith, noting that when mainstream Islamic belief includes a plurality of valid opinions, it may get reduced to a singular perspective. This, in itself, is not problematic unless combined with other factors that enable extremism. Similarly, "delegitimization" is often part of various political discourses aimed at societal improvement. Again, context matters here, and these are the contexts we intend to explore. Similarly, "dichotomization" is conceptually fuzzy because, while friend–foe divisions can be problematic given their severity, generally separating the world into "us" and "them" is integral to the formation of any organized group; particularly when social exclusion is involved. We adopt this diverse analytical approach not as a sign of conceptual agreement but to broaden our analytical lens and observe, given these assumptions, what can be identified on TikTok.

While radicalism indicators were coded for the ideological message of the videos, topics were coded for the topical content or setting. Concurrently, inductive coding was applied to the identification of topics directly from the video transcriptions. This process used an iterative approach to topic discovery and refinement. Initial coding rounds identified preliminary topics, which were then systematically reviewed and consolidated. Subsequent rounds of coding allowed for the emergence of new topics and the refinement of existing ones. This iterative process continued until theoretical saturation was reached, where no new significant topics emerged, and the existing categories adequately captured the diversity of content in the data. The topics identified through this process are listed in Table 2.7. Similar to the indicators, multiple topics were coded per video, ultimately not exceeding 4 topics per video. Nearly 2000 of the 2983 videos had Islamic or Muslim content, based on the coded topics.

For the coding of radicalism indicators, a method analogous to coding opposing political or party positions was adopted (Kriesi et al., 2012, 44 ff): each indicator was coded with a "+1" when present in a video (radicalism) and a "−1" when its opposite was observed (anti-radicalism). This a priori approach allowed for the representation of each indicator and its contraindication, offering a contrasting view of the presence and

nature of radicalism indicators within the videos. Up to three indicators were coded per video, allowing for overlap or co-occurrence. The coding instructions focused on clear, apparent meaning, so highly ambiguous or unclear messages were generally not coded, reflecting the restrictive nature of the coding process. The coding procedure was initiated by two professional coders with backgrounds in Middle Eastern and Islamic studies, respectively. After a thorough training period by the two authors of this paper, which included collaborative coding and evaluation of the same examples, the coders completed their work under the authors' supervision. The coders were instructed to evaluate each video based solely on its apparent content, without inferring additional information from other videos by the same creator. Once this initial coding was completed, two student assistants with backgrounds in political science and economics were trained in the coding process. They conducted the first set of corrections to the initial coding, which was then reviewed and finalized by the two authors of this paper. Given that the student assistants are in their late teens to early twenties, their involvement brought perspectives from age groups more aligned with TikTok's young user base, providing valuable contrasts to the assessments made by the initial coders. This approach resulted in a coding process that underwent rigorous reviews and control loops by a total of six coders from different age groups and various academic backgrounds, ensuring a robust and diverse analytical framework.

2.3. Findings

2.3.1. Victimization, Grievances, and Political Action

Summary

In the discourse of German Islamic content creators on TikTok, narratives of victimhood are a salient feature, evidenced by "victimization" being the most frequently coded indicator (150 videos). This indicator acts as a key point, shaping distinct directions in political expression and action. The data on co-occurrence with the "victimization" indicator delineate a spectrum of responses that range from constructive engagement to subversive reactions (see Table 2.2). On one end, instances of "activism" (9), "interfaith harmony" (5), "emancipation" (2), and "anti dehumanization" (1) represent a positive response to victimhood. These indicators suggest content that is geared toward fostering legal political activism, such as protests and advocacy, which are vital to healthy political discourse. "Interfaith harmony" narratives promote dialogue and cooperation across religious lines, while "emancipation" discussions, often centered around the rights and empowerment of women and children, contribute to a more equitable society. The stance against dehumanization ("anti dehumanization") highlights a commitment to uphold the dignity of all individuals. The "Middle East" remains a constant source of grievance due

to the ongoing Israel–Palestine conflict, which resonates deeply among Muslims. The portrayal of Muslims in "media" (30) often triggers discussions about misrepresentation.

Table 2.2. Co-occurrences of radicalism indicators and topics with "victimization"

Radicalism Indicators	Count	Topic	Count
activism	9	western hypocrisy	52
delegitimization	6	media	30
interfaith harmony	5	headscarf	30
dichotomization	2	middle east	23
emancipation	2	crime	20
revisionism	2	discrimination	20
anti dehumanization	1	advocacy	15
dehumanization	1	history	14
monism	1	gender	12
		morality	8
		motivation	8
		kinship	5
		conversion	4
		education	4
		ramadan	3
		lifestyle	2
		shirk	2
		permissibility	1
		rap	1

Conversely, "delegitimization" (6), "dichotomization" (2), "revisionism" (2), "dehumanization" (1), and "monism" (1) reflect a more radical approach to victim narratives. These indicators refer to content that challenges the legitimacy of present democratic institutions ("delegitimization"), promotes binary us-versus-them thinking ("dichotomization"), calls for a return to past Islamic governance structures like the Ottoman Empire ("revisionism"), and engages in dehumanizing rhetoric ("dehumanization"). Both types of approaches are rooted in the same societal issues. Content creators on TikTok navigate this dichotomy, with some leveraging the persuasive power of victim narratives to galvanize positive change, while others may exploit these grievances, leading their audience

down a more divisive path.

The topics that typically orbit the "victimization" narrative and incite political action are telling of the community's concerns. A look at Figure 2.1 reveals the relationships of indicators and topics that relate to victimhood. "Western hypocrisy", with its focus on the perceived double standards of Western societies towards Muslims, is a frequent touchstone for both positive activism and radical discourse. This is evidenced by its co-occurrence with "delegitimization" (2) on one hand and "interfaith harmony" (4) on the other. Debates surrounding the "headscarf" encapsulate the struggle for religious expression and the associated rights. Interestingly, the headscarf debate is tied to emancipatory content ("emancipation", 2) and promotes legal activism addressing struggles faced by veiled Muslim women ("activism", 2). Lastly, "discrimination", encompassing racism, is a pervasive issue that can either unite communities in a search for justice or be used to exacerbate tensions. The high co-occurrence with "interfaith harmony" (4) and "emancipation" (2) displays a desire for equality in relation to other faith groups and mitigation of their differential treatment. Additionally, a prominent streamline to promote the delegitimization of the socio-political system at hand seems to be tied to religious advocacy ("advocacy", 2). The fact that this is under the general theme of victimization suggests that certain actors use victimhood to create the necessity for political change, as it portrays Western political systems as failing Muslims or perpetrating their grievances and delegitimizing them through supposed religious doctrines that underline the illegitimacy of those systems.

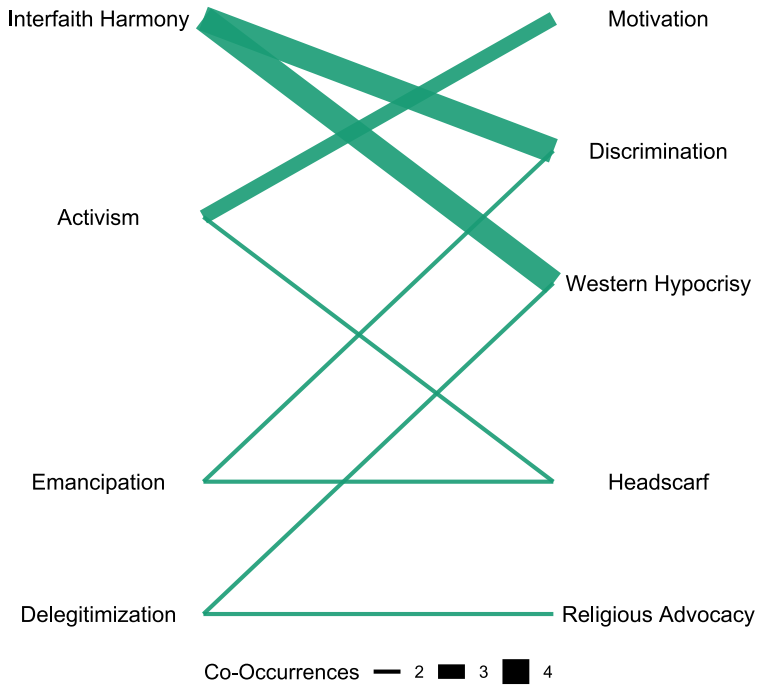
In summary, how Islamic content creators on TikTok respond to the narrative of victimhood—whether through activism, interfaith dialogue, and emancipatory content or via delegitimization, dichotomy, and dehumanizing rhetoric—is indicative of their approach to political action. These responses, while rooted in the same foundational issues, take different trajectories, shaping the contours of radical and anti-radical political expression within the German Muslim community.

Examples

Looking at "Creator PT36, Video 1", this video offers a critical examination of the German media's portrayal of the 1992 Rostock-Lichtenhagen riots, with a particular focus on the tabloid newspaper BILD. The content creator contends that BILD has failed to learn from its historical errors and continues to foment animosity toward refugees and Muslims. The creator charges the newspaper with hypocrisy and double standards, positing that BILD's reportage played a role in exacerbating the riots.

The prevailing narrative within this video is one of victimization, depicting Muslims as subjects of unjust treatment and biased media representation. The content creator's objectives appear dual: firstly, to unveil the purported hypocrisy and Islamophobic agenda of the German media, especially BILD; and secondly, to heighten awareness within the

Figure 2.1. Bipartite network of co-occurring topics and indicators within "victimization"



Single co-occurrences omitted
Radicalism indicators on the left side; topics on the right side

Muslim community regarding the perceived injustices they endure. By underscoring the media's role in perpetuating negative stereotypes and inciting hatred, the creator aims to cultivate a sense of shared grievance and collective identity among Muslims. The alternative proposed in this video is a call to action, urging the Muslim community (referred to as "Ummah") to recognize and expose the "deception" orchestrated by the media. This implies a form of activism intended to counteract the perceived bias and discrimination through heightened awareness and solidarity within the Muslim community. These observations are congruent with the article's discussion of victim narratives, which elucidates how content related to themes such as "media", "discrimination", and "western hypocrisy" frequently portrays Muslims as victims of injustice and marginalization. The video's critique of BILD's coverage and its alleged contribution to anti-Muslim sentiment echoes the article's assertion that such narratives can engender either constructive activism or more radical stances. The exhortation to expose the media's "deception" and mobilize the Muslim community can be construed as a form of anti-radical activism, aligning with

one of the potential responses to victim narratives delineated in the article. Nevertheless, the video's emphasis on the collective identity of the "Ummah" and its opposition to the German media could also be interpreted as fostering an "us vs. them" mentality.

In another example, "Creator PT12, Video 1", a more abstract approach is pursued. This video delves into the portrayal of Muslims in films and television series, highlighting the prevalent stereotypes and negative representations that have shaped public perceptions over time aligning with our findings on the "media" topic and its role in perpetuating biases and misrepresentations of the Muslim community. The creator first presents a list of common tropes associated with Muslim characters in media, such as being depicted as villains, terrorists, aggressive individuals, oppressors of women, or backward and ignorant people. These stereotypes, the creator argues, have been repeatedly reinforced through the film industry, leading to the formation of prejudices among the general public. This critique of media representation resonates with our observations on how Islamic content creators on TikTok often challenge and deconstruct dominant narratives that marginalize or misrepresent their community.

In fact, the video's emphasis on the long-term impact of these negative portrayals suggests that the creator intends to raise awareness about the insidious nature of anti-Muslim propaganda in popular media. By highlighting how these stereotypes have been perpetuated over the years, the creator encourages the audience to critically examine the media they consume while at the same time confirming a possible existing feeling of rejection and discrimination. The video's assertion that anti-Muslim propaganda operates on multiple levels, including the negative portrayal of Islam in public discourse, further underscores the systemic nature of the issue. This broader critique of societal biases against Muslims resonates with our findings on the "western hypocrisy" code, which captures the perceived double standards and discrimination faced by Muslims in Western contexts.

In previous examples, the target groups are provided with "proof" of hypocrisy in Germany, while other instances emphasize the international context. It appears, however, that critiques on an international level are often intertwined with local realities and vice versa, effectively internationalizing the struggle against perceived Islamophobia and injustice, which is seen as pervasive. This approach aligns with the Islamic narrative of an international community, the Ummah. An example of this is "Creator PT18, Video 1", which focuses on the international context, critiquing the perceived double standards and hypocrisy of Western countries in their reactions to the Russian invasion of Ukraine compared to other conflicts involving Muslim countries. The creator argues that the wave of solidarity with Ukraine and the hatred against Russia is exaggerated and hypocritical, as similar reactions were not seen when Russia attacked Syria or Libya. He calls the current situation a "fascist Russian hunt", with sanctions targeting Russian oligarchs, banks, and politicians like Gerhard Schröder for being pro-Putin. The creator compares this to the lack of consequences for the U.S. after the Iraq and Afghanistan wars, which he considers illegal and part of the colonial powers' actions over the past 200–300 years.

Furthermore, the creator criticizes the differential treatment in Germany of Ukrainian refugees compared to Syrian, Iraqi, and other Muslim refugees, citing media reports that emphasize the "whiteness" and "Europeanness" of Ukrainian refugees, clearly highlighting the perceived double standards and hypocrisy of Western countries in their reactions to conflicts involving Muslim countries versus Ukraine. While also addressing the hypocrisy towards Muslims, the speaker in this instance diverges from previous examples by appearing to accept it. He argues that it is normal and understandable for Westerners to prioritize "their own people", asserting that Muslims should similarly prioritize their own community. A notable distinction lies in the proposed call to action. Unlike previous speakers who merely suggested the need to address hypocrisy, this speaker is unequivocal. The call for the establishment of an Islamic caliphate, coupled with the delegitimization of existing Muslim countries, represents a radical position within the spectrum of victim narratives. Nonetheless, this perspective is relatively uncommon.

2.3.2. Religious Advocacy, Everyday Life, and Guidance

Summary

Religious advocacy ("advocacy"), with 1144 videos, is by far the most coded topic, a part of which can be traced back to our selection of accounts with religious content. However, it marks the relevance that religious teachings, reminders, discussions, and jurisprudence have for these creators. This topic often intersects with elements of "lifestyle" (103), resonating with a wider audience by linking doctrinal teachings to the practicalities of modern life (see Table 2.3). This engagement with lifestyle topics underscores a discourse that is not merely about religious edicts but about the contextual application of faith in everyday life—negotiating the "permissibility" (24) of practices and the distinctions between halal and haram within daily routines.

The pronounced overlap between religious guidance on lifestyle matters and the halal–haram discourse reveals a community seeking to reconcile their faith with the complexities of contemporary life. Yet, this quest for religious clarity is deeply entwined with the broader ideological spectrum ranging from rigid and harsh ("merciless theology", 5) to its antithesis: compassionate and so on ("anti merciless theology", 64). The presence of "monism" (9) suggests a subset of content that endorses an uncompromising view of religious interpretation, potentially fostering a uniformity at odds with the diverse realities of Muslim life in Germany. Conversely, "anti monism" (9) reflects a countervailing narrative that embraces multiple interpretations, resonating with a community that values diverse expressions of faith. Similarly, the mention of "sectarianism" (4) within the context of "advocacy" points to the enduring challenges of intra-faith dialogue, where the potential for exclusivity can be countered by a pluralistic ethos ("anti sectarianism", 1). This dynamic indicates that while religious advocacy on TikTok can be a source of

Table 2.3. Co-occurrences of radicalism indicators and topics with "advocacy"

Radicalism Indicators	Count	Topic	Count
anti merciless theology	64	lifestyle	103
victimization	15	motivation	91
anti monism	9	kinship	63
monism	9	morality	43
delegitimization	5	afterlife	41
interfaith harmony	5	gender	30
merciless theology	5	education	28
sectarianism	4	history	24
activism	3	permissibility	24
emancipation	3	shirk	19
revisionism	3	ramadan	17
anti closure	2	media	11
dehumanization	2	conversion	10
anti emancipation	2	business	9
closure	1	headscarf	7
anti dichotomization	1	comedy	6
dichotomization	1	rap	4
anti interfaith harmony	1	role models	4
anti sectarianism	1	western hypocrisy	4
		crime	3
		discrimination	2
		ijma	2
		middle east	1

guidance and communal solidarity, it also navigates the delicate lines between unity and division, between the dogmatic and the pluralistic.

In essence, the discourse on religious advocacy, as captured on TikTok, is a reflection of a community in dialogue with itself about the nature of religious observance. The content spans the spectrum from advocating for a prescribed religious lifestyle to challenging the boundaries of traditional interpretations. This diversity is not simply a reflection of individual preferences but a mirror to the entrenched divide between radical and anti-

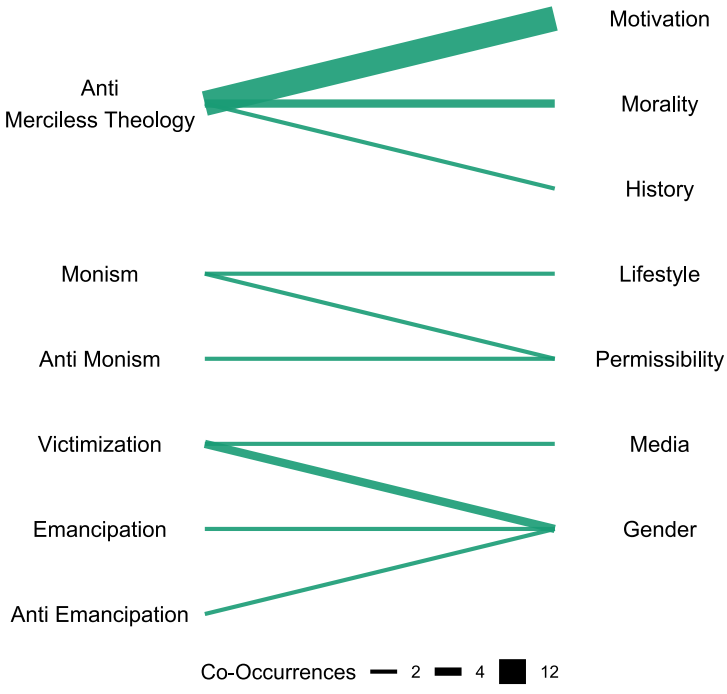
radical religious thoughts, where the clerical guidance provided by content creators is imbued with their ideological leanings on issues like "merciless theology", "monism", and "sectarianism". In conclusion, the discourse of "advocacy" on TikTok, with its intersection of lifestyle and religious legality, serves as a microcosm of the broader debate on religious life in the digital age. It showcases how the quest for personal religious guidance on lifestyle matters is linked to the ideological divide of religious thought within the Muslim community. The cleavages delineated in these findings reveal the nuanced and multifaceted nature of religious advocacy, highlighting the critical role of content creators in reinforcing various interpretations of faith. The existence of these videos, addressing rulings on haram and halal and transmitting religious knowledge that pertains to lifestyle issues, goes beyond the mere need for religious knowledge. In fact, this content indicates the inherent need of Muslims for guidance on their lives as a minority in a non-Muslim society, where these matters are not socially institutionalized. Moreover, the trend toward societal individualization adds to the need for German Muslims to seek guidance in a cultural landscape where their specific customs, values, and practices cannot be assumed or taken for granted. It could be further argued that these videos are indicative of a need to be integrated into society, fulfilling the basic necessity of navigating within it, showing that they harmonize the realities of both being German citizens and being Muslim. Islamic content creators are on the supply side of this demand, finding diverging ideological ways to meet these needs.

The data further delineate a dichotomy within the Islamic dialogue on TikTok, distinguishing between content with a propensity toward religious discourse and politically charged content. This distinction is particularly salient when contrasted with the findings related to the "victimization" narrative, where political subjects are more prevalent. Here, "advocacy" aligns more frequently with topics of religious permissibility ("permissibility", 24), morals and ethics ("morality", 43), and discussions on the afterlife ("afterlife", 41), indicating a community more engaged with purely theological concerns. This begs the question of how "religious" the politically radical content is of Islamic content creators and vice versa.

Visiting Figure 2.2 unveils additional insights. Both "monism" and "anti monism" demonstrate a notable connection to the notion of religious lawfulness ("permissibility", both 2). This suggests how religious advocacy on the permissibility of various actions is directly linked to jurisprudence, communicated based on monistic or anti-monistic interpretations, which either recognize ambiguities or strictly delineate between haram (forbidden) and halal (permitted).

Another notable co-occurrence intersecting the religious advocacy topic are "victimization" and "gender" (4). This is evidence of a dual framing regarding Muslim women. It illustrates how Muslim women are portrayed by content creators, with one frame being political ("victimization") and the other religious ("advocacy"), with the three intersecting in this case. This type of content works as religious advice to Muslim women enduring

Figure 2.2. Bipartite network of co-occurring topics and indicators within "advocacy"



Single co-occurrences omitted
Radicalism indicators on the left side; topics on the right side

victimization due to their intersectional identity. "Victimization" and "headscarf" also converge under "advocacy" once, highlighting this intersection of framings.

Lastly, the combination of "anti merciless theology" and "motivation" (12) serves as a message to German Muslims, who are probably young given the TikTok demographics, who may struggle with feelings of guilt, perceived moral deficiencies on their part, or uncertainty about their religious practices and their sufficiency. The prevalent message here is hope and mercy, functioning as pastoral care and dawah (spiritual outreach or religious propagation) simultaneously. This narrative motivates and addresses the realities of temptation and despair, reinforcing a pastoral and encouraging presence within religious discussions.

Examples

Examples of motivational religious advocacy can be found in many cases in our dataset. For example, in "Creator PT1, Video 1". The content directly addresses Muslims who have

committed sins and are feeling remorseful or desperate. The creator reassures the audience of Allah's forgiveness, emphasizing that no sin is too great to be forgiven. This aligns with the "hope and mercy" message mentioned in the introduction, providing pastoral care by encouraging repentance and reinforcing the belief in Allah's mercy. In "Creator PT28, Video 1", a hadith (narration of the Prophet Muhammad) is shared, offering a supplication for times of worry and distress. By providing this practical spiritual tool, the content creator delivers both pastoral care and religious instruction, aiding viewers in coping with anxiety through Islamic practices. This guidance is particularly valuable given the uncertainty arising from the plethora of seemingly contradictory "legal rulings" on TikTok regarding what is "haram" (forbidden) and what is "halal" (permissible). Another short but representative one is "Creator PT20, Video 1" which reinforces the theme of Allah's boundless mercy, encouraging viewers not to doubt Allah's forgiveness. It addresses the potential self-doubt and guilt that young Muslims might experience, offering reassurance and hope.

These examples demonstrate how TikTok is being used as a platform for religious advocacy and pastoral care within the German Muslim community. They address common spiritual and emotional challenges faced by young Muslims, offering encouragement, hope, and practical religious solutions. The application of mercy and compassion as a central element of their religious advocacy may fulfill several interconnection functions for these content creators. By addressing common emotional and spiritual struggles among young Muslims, they foster empathy and reduce feelings of isolation. Simultaneously, these videos reinforce core Islamic teachings about Allah's mercy and forgiveness, making theological concepts accessible and relatable to a young audience. This dual approach not only enhances religious understanding but also strengthens viewers' spiritual practices.

The creators also foster community building by discussing shared experiences, creating a virtual community space that is especially significant for young Muslims in predominantly non-Muslim environments like Germany. This sense of community may help viewers to feel connected to a larger Muslim group. In addition to serving as a form of dawah, these videos present Islam as a religion of mercy and hope to both Muslims and non-Muslims, potentially countering negative stereotypes and broadening the religion's appeal. They also provide practical spiritual tools for coping with daily emotional challenges, integrating faith into everyday struggles, and affirming the Muslim identity of young German Muslims by bridging their religious identity with their experiences in German society. Lastly, these videos implicitly counter radical ideologies by emphasizing Allah's mercy and forgiveness, promoting a message of hope and divine acceptance that may protect viewers from more extreme interpretations of Islam. Hence, this would classify as an anti-radical religious narratives. Overall, these TikTok videos could contribute to the spiritual and community support, education, and resilience of young Muslims, helping them navigate their identities and integrate more positively into society.

Expanding upon the themes of pastoral care, religious education, and community

building, "Creator PT1, Video 2" critiques the behavior of Muslims who focus on exposing others' faults, addressing a common issue within religious communities: the tendency to judge others while lacking self-reflection. This approach not only fosters personal spiritual growth but also serves as religious education by referencing Islamic teachings that discourage backbiting and urge the protection of fellow Muslims' dignity. The creator makes these concepts accessible by relating them to everyday scenarios, thus contributing to community cohesion by discouraging divisive behaviors. The video also connects traditional religious teachings with contemporary social issues, particularly how social media behaviors like fault-finding can harm community dynamics. Unlike previous content that provided reassurance, this video adopts a corrective tone, specifically addressing the damaging impact of such behaviors.

Moreover, this critique often intersects with gendered issues, especially in the scrutiny of women's dress and behavior within the Muslim community. This reflects broader multi-discrimination challenges faced by Muslim women, who endure Islamophobic attitudes in broader society and heightened judgment within their own communities. For example, another creator criticizes women for wearing form-fitting clothing despite wearing a hijab, viewing it as seeking societal approval:

> [Video Text (translation)] "They cover their hair but emphasize their body all the more. Because somehow you have to 'please' society. They put on body-hugging clothes and call it modern. Dear Ukhti [engl.: Sister], is it really worth it to you? Just for the attention of people. You have taken a big step and covered yourself, but then also take these steps towards Allah and not Shaytan" (Creator PT32, Video 1)

In general, women are often held to higher standards of modesty and behavior, with their choices scrutinized and judged more harshly than those of their male counterparts. Connecting this to the previous analysis, we can see how the criticism of fault-finding behavior within the community, as discussed in "Creator PT1, Video 2", takes on a gendered dimension. While the original content creator advocated for self-reflection and empathy, the reality is that much of the criticism and fault-finding within the community seems to be disproportionately directed at women.

2.3.3. The Headscarf Debate: A Spectrum of Reactions

The discourse surrounding the "headscarf" serves as a microcosm of the broader struggle for religious expression and associated rights. As mentioned before, the headscarf finds its discursive place in both religious and political contexts. In Figure 2.1, the headscarf debate is closely linked to emancipatory content ("emancipation", 2) and promotes legal activism aimed at addressing the challenges faced by veiled Muslim women ("activism",

2). This section will delve into qualitative examples that further illustrate the spectrum of responses to these struggles.

Some transcripts reveal a nuanced perspective on the hijab, portraying it not merely as a religious garment but as a potent symbol of identity and resistance. For instance, the statement "Der Hijab ist unsere Krone" (engl.: "The hijab is our crown") from "Creator PT17, Video 1" transforms the hijab from a mere head covering into a symbol of pride and empowerment. The creator seeks to reframe the narrative surrounding the hijab, challenging negative perceptions and stereotypes. By employing the metaphor of a crown, they aim to instill a sense of dignity and strength among hijab-wearing Muslim women. This framing aligns with the paper's findings on how Islamic content creators often use TikTok to challenge dominant narratives and assert their identity. In many other cases, male and female content creators alike call upon hijab-wearing women to wear it with pride. These kinds of responses resonate with our findings regarding non-violent answers to victimhood as they can be seen as forms of activism and emancipation while affirming the identity of the target group. Responses as such can be seen as ways to rationalize or make the practice more bearable. The rationalization of the hijab among Muslim women in Western societies emerges as a complex response to discrimination and perceived injustice. In our findings, it manifests in various forms, such as (1) practical benefits like sun protection and modesty, argued from a more pragmatic than religious standpoint, (2) social and cultural benefits emphasizing identity and community belonging, and (3) religious justifications that view challenges as divine tests and integral to religious practice. These rationalizations, while varied, share a common goal: to help Muslim women justify their choice to wear the hijab amidst societal pressures or discrimination. These justifications serve as a coping mechanism, enabling them to uphold their religious and cultural practices in Western societies.

In "Creator PT12, Video 2", the creator presents a pragmatic and non-religious argument for wearing the hijab—as an act of liberation from societal beauty standards, challenging the narrative that it symbolizes oppression. They argue that the choice involves either submitting to divine will by wearing the hijab or succumbing to society's unrealistic beauty pressures, highlighted by statistics on young children's body image issues and the negative impact of social media on mental health. Furthermore, they discuss the role of the entertainment industry in perpetuating these beauty standards, noting that the societal pressure to conform is more oppressive than wearing the hijab. Acknowledging the challenges posed by an Islamophobic atmosphere in Western societies, the creator calls for community support to combat these negative perceptions and ease the practice of wearing the hijab.

In the TikTok video "Creator PT4, Video 1" titled "Sense & Advantage of the Islamic covering [veiling]", the content creator uses both religious and pragmatic arguments to rationalize wearing the hijab. The video features a social experiment comparing reactions to a woman in conventional attire versus Islamic covering, illustrating how the hijab

protects against unwanted attention and harassment. The creator combines pragmatic benefits, such as protection from environmental factors and social issues, with religious justifications from chapter An-Nur (The Light) of the Quran, emphasizing modesty for both genders. This dual approach aligns with broader Islamic discourse that presents religious practices as solutions to modern social issues, making them more relatable and acceptable to a wider audience. However, the argument oversimplifies complex social issues by implying that women's clothing choices can prevent harassment, rather than addressing the broader negative societal attitudes and behaviors towards (veiled) Muslim women, which include discrimination in multiple aspects of life.

An example of the latter is "Creator PT16, Video 1". As a German woman with a hijab and a foreign-sounding surname, she shares her experience of perceived discrimination during a housing search. She recounts how an acquaintance stressed to a potential landlord that she is German, despite her foreign name. The content creator uses this incident to highlight the persistent discrimination in German society against individuals with foreign-sounding names or visible Muslim identity markers. By describing the experience as "traurig" (sad), she expresses disappointment in the continued relevance of national origin or religion in everyday interactions.

In the video "Creator PT42, Video 1", the content creator addresses a hijab ban in the workplace, expressing frustration and calling for a boycott of businesses that enforce such policies. This highlights not only the discrimination against hijab-wearing Muslim women but also criticizes the perceived hypocrisy in Western claims of tolerance and acceptance. The creator aims to raise awareness, challenge narratives of tolerance, mobilize the Muslim community and allies through economic actions like boycotts and empower Muslims by underscoring their collective consumer power. The call for a boycott is an example of legal political activism.

The discourse on the hijab and the discrimination experienced by Muslim women in Western societies, as depicted in our analysis, provides essential context for understanding the landscape of religious advocacy in the German Islamic TikTok community. Although the chapter on religious advocacy has already been discussed, it is important to reiterate how the individual stories of discrimination and the justification of religious practices inform broader ideological debates.

Content creators often navigate the fine line between emancipatory discourse and potentially extreme rhetoric, a tension that enriches our understanding of religious advocacy. These dynamics reveal how personal experiences and attempts to rationalize religious practices like wearing the hijab are translated into broader religious discourse on TikTok. This discussion extends into how religious principles are applied to lifestyle and everyday life issues, resonating with prior observations that frame the hijab as a practical response to social challenges. Furthermore, the presence of contrasting indicators like "monism" and "anti monism", along with "sectarianism" and "anti sectarianism" in the religious advocacy discourse, highlights a community actively engaged in complex debates over

religious interpretation and practice within a diverse, secular society. This engagement also showcases efforts to weave religious advocacy into discussions on lifestyle topics.

Topics, Popularity, and Gender

In examining the landscape of Muslim content creation on TikTok in Germany, a notable distinction emerges in the thematic choices and engagement patterns among male and female creators (see Table 2.4). This differentiation becomes evident when analyzing data encompassing various topics ranging from lifestyle and personal relationships to religious jurisprudence and societal issues. However, it is important to note that this analysis is based on a limited sample, including only six female accounts, and should be taken with caution. The findings primarily offer preliminary insights, serving as a foundation for further elaboration and research.

Female content creators predominantly engage in topics such as "lifestyle" (39.6%) and "kinship" (12.6%), which encompass daily life elements like clothing, food, travel, and family relationships. This inclination suggests a proclivity towards sharing and consuming content related to personal experiences and everyday life matters. On the other hand, male creators show a penchant for religious or theological topics like religious advocacy ("advocacy", 30.1% male versus 8.1% female). Another indication for this demarcation is the topic "permissibility" (7.9% male versus 1.1% female), which involves discussions on Islamic jurisprudence, particularly the delineation of permissible (halal) and forbidden (haram) actions within Islam. Such a trend indicates a male-oriented content focus on doctrinal and legalistic aspects of the faith. The analysis of user engagement metrics further illuminates these patterns. For instance, the comedy genre, characterized by humorous and light-hearted content, though moderately represented by female creators (5%) and to a lesser extent by males (0.4%), exhibits high viewer engagement with an average of 552,373 views and 17,150 likes. The brevity of these videos, averaging 20 s, aligns with a general audience's preference for concise and entertaining content.

Conversely, topics like conversion, involving narratives and discussions about converting to Islam, despite having less representation and longer average durations (79 s), maintain a substantial viewership. This may indicate a dedicated audience segment interested in in-depth explorations of personal faith journeys and the complexities of religious identity. The engagement trends also hint at varying audience preferences, where shorter, entertaining pieces are more widely viewed and liked, while longer, more contemplative content may find resonance with a more dedicated viewership. This divergence in content consumption underscores the diverse interests of the audience, ranging from seeking quick entertainment to engaging with detailed, thought-provoking discussions. Generally speaking, more serious or analytical videos, like those on topics such as "shirk", "middle east", or "history", tend to be longer on average, likely because the necessary transfer

Table 2.4. Video metrics by topic (descending by avg. views)

Topic	Female*	Male*	Avg. Likes	Avg. Views	Avg. Duration**
comedy	5%	0.4%	17,150	552,373	20
lifestyle	39.6%	8.8%	26303	385,333	37
kinship	12.6%	8.3%	17466	216,151	62
conversion	2.3%	1.7%	18351	175,363	79
permissibility	1.1%	7.9%	11072	146,012	69
western hypocrisy	0.4%	2%	9673	127,561	86
education	2.2%	1.6%	14082	111,535	56
crime	0.4%	1.2%	8036	100,116	74
shirk	0.9%	1.6%	9138	99,500	130
advocacy	8.1%	30.1%	12175	94,389	52
gender	2%	3.4%	6786	91,989	70
afterlife	0.7%	4.1%	9734	83,113	69
role models	0%	0.4%	8279	82,867	78
media	0.5%	1.4%	7568	80,675	72
motivation	3.4%	5.3%	10157	75,648	55
morality	5%	7.9%	7758	73,022	88
ramadan	2%	4%	7202	69,800	63
headscarf	9%	1.8%	5587	62,271	61
middle east	0%	1.1%	6003	56,628	108
rap	0.5%	0.5%	3253	39,615	46
discrimination	0.9%	1.1%	2727	38,586	155
history	0.9%	4.8%	3298	33,854	152
ijma	0%	0.4%	876	27,654	92
business	2.3%	0.4%	1979	21,970	88

* Share of all topics in the videos of the respective gender; ** In seconds

of knowledge demands more time than more casual topics like "comedy" and "lifestyle" require.

In a nutshell, the data suggest distinct gender-based preferences in thematic focus. Female creators tend to gravitate toward topics centered around personal and lifestyle narratives, while male creators are more inclined toward religious and legal discussions. The variation in audience engagement across different video lengths and subjects further suggests a multifaceted audience base with diverse interests. These insights not only shed light on the content strategies of these creators but also might provide an understanding

of the audience's engagement patterns within the specific socio-cultural context of the German Muslim community. Ultimately, this illustrates how the entertaining nature of TikTok and its prevalent attention economy inform Islamic content creators' practices. We argue that, in part, these creators become members of the overarching TikTok culture and its inherent logic of marketability, making them similar to other creators on the platform, who likewise address lifestyle-related issues and employ comedy. However, they also engage with specific topics and issues that resonate with their German Muslim identity, distinguishing them as a unique demographic simultaneously.

2.4. Discussion

This study aimed to contribute to the understanding of (anti-)radical content within the German Islamic TikTok community, specifically focusing on content creators who produce Islamic content or content about the Muslim identity. It employed a systematic categorization of (anti-)radical content and topics amongst this population. For that purpose, a qualitative coding of 2983 videos from 43 accounts was conducted to identify both the topics and the nature of the content (radical or anti-radical). Metadata such as likes, views, shares, and comments were also collected to contextualize the impact of these videos within the TikTok ecosystem. The findings were then presented by providing both quantitative and qualitative arguments, to answer the following questions: What types of radical and anti-radical content appear in videos by German Islamic TikTok creators, and what topics are commonly linked with these contents? How do these associations shape the narratives of these videos?

In summary, the representation of indicators commonly associated with radicalism and extremism in the literature is limited among the prominent German Islamic content creators in our sample. Narratives of victimhood are prevalent within the community, with "victimization" being a frequently coded indicator that leads to diverse political responses. Some creators leverage these narratives to facilitate discussions on their personal experiences and perceived injustices, advocating for equality, legal activism, and interfaith harmony. Conversely, others adopt more radical stances, profoundly questioning the legitimacy of the existing political order and partly endorsing divisive or revisionist ideologies. Issues surrounding victim narratives often involve significant societal concerns such as discrimination, the portrayal of Muslims in media, and double standards in Western societies. Exploring the specific videos highlights how content creators address these topics. They critique media representations and societal biases, with some advocating for activism and solidarity within the Muslim community as a means of addressing these issues. Others, however, argue that the existing political system is fundamentally illegitimate and propose the re-establishment of an Islamic Caliphate, but one shaped by their specific ideological vision, as the only viable alternative. Both forms of political advocacy are often portrayed as a necessary response to perceived injustices, with content creators using their platforms

to challenge and possibly reshape the narrative around Muslim identity and belonging in Western contexts.

The discourse on the hijab within the German Islamic TikTok community illustrates its role as both a symbol of religious expression and a focal point for broader socio-political debates. The hijab is portrayed not just as a garment but as a symbol of identity and resistance, with statements elevating it to a symbol of pride and empowerment. These narratives challenge prevalent stereotypes and assert the dignity of hijab-wearing Muslim women. Additionally, rationalizations for wearing the hijab are brought forward. They vary from practical benefits, argued not necessarily from a religious standpoint, such as protection and modesty, to deeper religious and cultural significance that aligns with religious and community identities. Such justifications often function as coping mechanisms to make the practice more bearable amid societal pressures and discrimination. For example, one creator presents the hijab as an act of liberation from societal beauty standards, suggesting a choice between conforming to divine will or societal expectations. Moreover, the discussion extends into the practical challenges of wearing the hijab, such as workplace bans, underscoring ongoing discrimination, and emphasizing the need for activism and community support. These complications surrounding hijab-wearing highlight its complex role within society. This complexity is brought into the TikTok arena to foster exchange, raise awareness, and build solidarity on the matter. TikTok thus functions as a third space for many, serving as a platform where these critical issues are openly discussed and contested.

Religious advocacy ("advocacy"), with 1144 videos, emerges as the most dominant topic among German Islamic TikTok content creators, frequently intersecting with lifestyle topics. This reveals a community deeply engaged in linking doctrinal teachings to everyday practicalities, navigating the nuances of "permissibility" and the halal–haram dichotomy. Such content not only addresses religious edicts but also applies faith contextually to daily life, reflecting a community endeavoring to harmonize their religious beliefs with the complexities of living in today's Germany. Additionally, discussions extend into issues of religious interpretation, showcased by the presence of both "monism" and "anti-monism", indicating a spectrum from rigid doctrinal adherence to more pluralistic approaches. Overall, the discourse on religious advocacy within TikTok serves as a reflection of broader religious life debates, illustrating how digital platforms have become central in guiding personal religious practice and addressing or reaffirming the ideological divides within the Muslim community. These discussions are crucial for understanding how religious content on TikTok helps navigate personal identity and community dynamics within a non-Muslim societal framework, fostering a sense of belonging and guidance for German Muslims.

By examining the topical distributions and the significant reach that some of these videos achieve, it becomes evident that Islamic content creators, much like other creators on TikTok, follow a similar logics of marketability. This positions them within the

broader TikTok culture, where lifestyle topics and performativity play a central role, even for creators of Islamic content, while still reflecting distinct aspects of their religious and cultural identities.

In summary, this study represents a novel approach adding to the limited literature on the Muslim ideological landscape on TikTok, specifically within Germany. It integrated the technical affordances of TikTok into its methodology, addressing the complexities of radicalism from a multidimensional perspective. This research is just one of many efforts needed to deepen our understanding of the role TikTok plays for marginalized groups, including Muslims, and how its technical and social workings may foster or mitigate radicalization.

On that note, we urge future research to explore this nexus further. Essential areas for further investigation include determining the prevalence of (anti-)radical material through large-scale studies to assess how widespread certain narratives are. Also, shifting the focus from the supply side (content creators) to the demand side (consumers) by assessing, possibly through experimental frameworks, the actual effects of TikTok consumption and its typical engagement patterns on religious and political radicalization is crucial. Including the role and impact of anti-radical content to reliably measure how the usual consumption of both types of content ultimately influences the adoption of certain ideologies is important as well. Moreover, it is essential, contrary to the alarmism often associated with social media and political debates, to outline the positive, emancipatory, and empowering aspects of social media platforms like TikTok, especially for marginalized communities. Given the significance of gender in defining thematic demarcations and the role of the headscarf debate, further research should elaborate on gendered perspectives, which appear highly relevant in the online discourse of Muslims and broader society.

With the growing public and political attention on issues adjacent to radicalization, such as hate speech and violence online, developing research with nuanced and diverse analytical approaches is increasingly important. This includes a thorough understanding of the affordances and practices on specific social media platforms and adapting to the rapid pace of trends on these platforms to minimize the lag in obtaining evidence.

2.A Appendix

2.A.1. Tables and Figures

Table 2.5. Sampled accounts and account data

Pseudonym	Prior Research *	Account Status **	Gender	Videos	First Video	Last Video
PT1	Identified	Not Available	male	123	01.01.2022	28.12.2022
PT2	Not Identified	Available	female	72	02.01.2022	23.12.2022
PT3	Not Identified	Available	male	70	02.01.2022	29.12.2022
PT4	Not Identified	Available	male	83	02.01.2022	27.12.2022
PT5	Not Identified	Available	male	18	01.01.2022	07.06.2022
PT6	Identified	Available	male	73	17.08.2022	30.12.2022
PT7	Not Identified	Not Available	female	21	22.12.2022	31.12.2022
PT8	Not Identified	Available	male	69	02.01.2022	31.12.2022
PT9	Identified	Available	male	72	17.01.2022	28.12.2022
PT10	Not Identified	Available	male	10	03.04.2022	04.11.2022
PT11	Identified	Not Available	male	18	29.04.2022	12.12.2022
PT12	Identified	Available	male	71	25.01.2022	26.12.2022
PT13	Not Identified	New Account	male	68	12.01.2022	25.12.2022
PT14	Not Identified	Renamed	male	65	01.01.2022	26.12.2022
PT15	Not Identified	Available	couple	72	07.05.2022	27.12.2022
PT16	Not Identified	Available	female	148	01.01.2022	31.12.2022
PT17	Not Identified	Not Available	female	105	10.06.2022	30.12.2022
PT18	Identified	Available	male	63	01.01.2022	13.07.2022
PT19	Not Identified	Not Available	female	10	22.01.2022	13.10.2022
PT20	Not Identified	Available	male	21	02.01.2022	28.12.2022
PT21	Identified	Available	male	72	27.08.2022	07.12.2022
PT22	Not Identified	Available	male	80	05.07.2022	24.12.2022
PT23	Not Identified	Not Available	male	66	01.03.2022	27.12.2022
PT24	Not Identified	Renamed	unknown	25	08.09.2022	18.12.2022
PT25	Not Identified	Available	male	91	03.01.2022	19.11.2022
PT26	Not Identified	Available	male	156	04.01.2022	31.12.2022
PT27	Not Identified	Not Available	male	26	30.01.2022	27.12.2022
PT28	Identified	Available	male	81	22.01.2022	26.12.2022
PT29	Identified	Available	male	156	01.01.2022	29.12.2022
PT30	Identified	Available	male	93	10.01.2022	19.12.2022
PT31	Not Identified	Renamed	male	18	02.01.2022	26.12.2022
PT32	Not Identified	Not Available	male	14	28.07.2022	13.08.2022
PT33	Not Identified	Available	female	50	06.01.2022	28.12.2022
PT34	Not Identified	Available	male	155	10.01.2022	27.12.2022
PT35	Not Identified	Available	male	47	06.01.2022	21.12.2022
PT36	Identified	New Account	male	118	05.01.2022	30.12.2022

Pseudonym	Prior Research*	Account Status**	Gender	Videos	First Video	Last Video
PT37	Not Identified	Available	male	64	01.01.2022	23.12.2022
PT38	Not Identified	Available	male	24	06.01.2022	22.11.2022
PT39	Not Identified	Not Available	couple	59	01.01.2022	09.12.2022
PT40	Not Identified	Renamed	unknown	76	01.01.2022	26.12.2022
PT41	Not Identified	Not Available	male	50	04.01.2022	30.12.2022
PT42	Not Identified	Available	male	156	02.01.2022	30.12.2022
PT43	Identified	Available	male	54	11.01.2022	30.12.2022

* Labeled in prior research as radical or extremist; ** As of June 29th, 2024.

Table 2.6. List, description, and frequencies of radicalism indicators and their respective codes

Indicator	Total	Codes	Count	Content
Victimization	150	*	150	Victimization of the in-group, Muslims/Muslim nations. Not: Discrimination of other groups (see topic: discrimination)
		Anti *	0	Recognition of Muslims as aggressors
Merciless Theology	150	*	22	Theology of a vengeful, stern God/religion and no error tolerance or mercy
		Anti *	128	Belief in a merciful, understanding God with tolerance for human imperfection
Monism	47	*	24	Belief in a single, exclusively true interpretation and practice of Islam, while rejecting differing opinions and ambiguities
		Anti *	23	Embracing religious pluralism, tolerance of ambiguity, gray scales, and acceptance of diverse interpretations and practices within Islam
Activism	19	*	19	Promoting legal political activism (Protest, Boycott, Art)
		Anti *	0	Promoting against legal political activism
Emancipation	19	*	16	Emancipation of people/groups (typically women and children), rights to education, etc.
		Anti *	3	Subjection of people/groups, with limited or no access to rights and education
Interfaith	17	*	15	Embracing interfaith cohesion/exchange/collaboration/respect/equality
		Anti *	2	Rejection of interfaith cohesion/exchange/collaboration/respect/equality
Delegitimization	15	*	15	Belief in the illegitimacy/obsolescence of (German) democracy, political institutions, and the fundamental socio-political system
		Anti *	0	Explicitly affirming their legitimacy
Closure	11	*	3	Discrimination against and exclusion of differing Muslims, friends, or family members from certain spaces and social life

Indicator	Total	Codes	Count	Content
		Anti *	8	Against closure, granting access to spaces, favoring friendships/ties with differing Muslims, friends, or family members
Sectarianism	10	*	9	Denigration of other Islamic sects and exclusion of denominations from Islam that self-identify as Muslim; Takfirism
		Anti *	1	Promotion of religious inclusivity and acceptance of diverse Islamic denominations
Revisionism	8	*	8	(Re-)Establishment of the Islamic Caliphate or other past dynasties. Unification of Muslim peoples under one rule/Caliphate
		Anti *	0	Opposition to restoring past Islamic dynasties, advocating for separate, independent governance among Muslim communities
Dehumanization	7	*	3	Denying humanity of others, harsh insults
		Anti *	4	Against dehumanization, defending people against it
Dichotomization	5	*	4	Dividing the world, society, and groups into friend and foe
		Anti *	1	Seeing the world, society, and groups beyond friend and foe distinctions
Violence	2	*	0	Use of physical violence to achieve political/religious goals. Jihadist rhetoric
		Anti *	2	Pursuit of political/religious goals through nonviolent means, emphasizing peaceful discourse

The asterisks in the codes are placeholders for the indicator name

Table 2.7. List, description, and frequencies of topics

Topic	Count	Content
Advocacy	1144	Religious Advocacy, Reminders, Teachings, etc.
Lifestyle	593	Clothing, Food, Travel, Music, Dance
Kinship	385	Partnership, Family Relations
Morality	295	Moral Constitution/Morality of Society and People
Permissibility	272	What is allowed/not allowed in Islam (haram/halal)
Motivation	206	Empowering people, Spiritual support, Encouragement
History	165	Stories from History, History as a topic
Ramadan	147	Ramadan and Fasting
Afterlife	144	Death, Heaven, Hell
Gender	124	Gender Relations
Headscarf	110	Hijab, Headscarf, Veiling
Conversion	73	Converts' Stories, Conversion to Islam
Western hypocrisy	68	Hypocrisy of the West/Western countries towards Muslims compared to others
Education	65	Education (Personal, School, etc.)
Shirk	60	Monotheism (versus Polytheism)
Comedy	53	Funny and Humoristic Videos
Media	51	Media Entities, Reports, Outlets as a Topic
Crime	41	Crime, Criminality, Delinquency
Discrimination	41	Discrimination, Racism
Middle East	38	Israel–Palestine Conflict
Business	25	Finance, How to make Money
Rap	18	Rap Music and Personalities
Ijma	13	Islamic Jurisprudence given from consensus
Role models	13	Islamic and Popcultural Role models

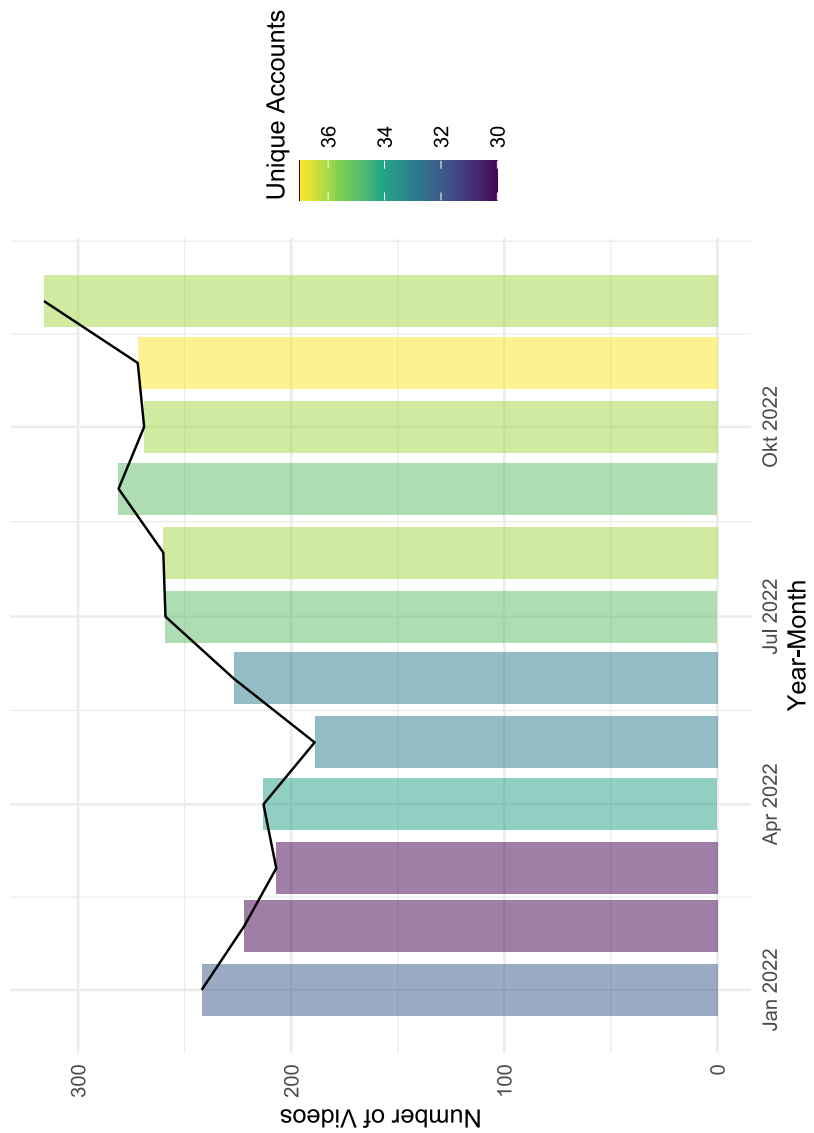
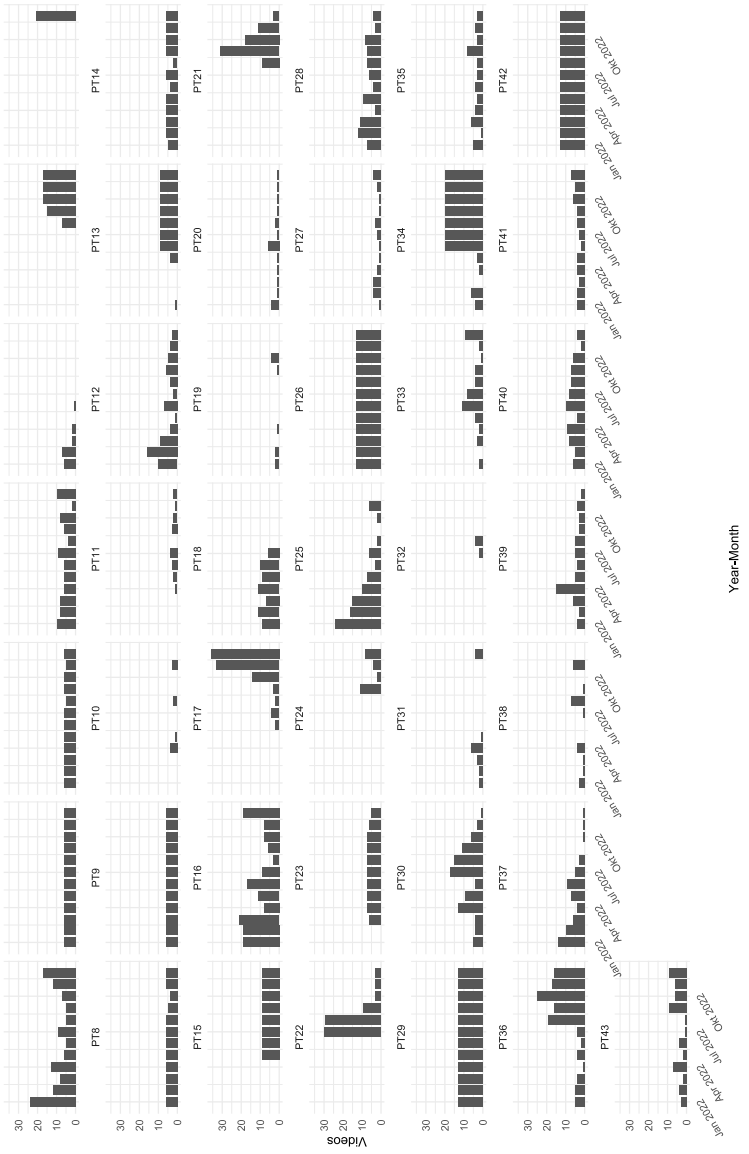


Figure 2.3. Monthly upload activity across all accounts and count of unique active accounts per month

Figure 2.4. Monthly upload activity by account



2.A.2. Transcriptions

Creator PT36, Video 1

[Video Text (translation)] "The hypocrisy of the BILD! Rostock riots How could the riots in Lichtenhagen happen? Right-wing extremists attack refugee accommodation! 23 August 1992. He who sits in a glass house should not throw stones."

[Video clip (translation)] "At the center of the criticism is the deployment of the police. Under their watch, right-wing extremists were able to set fire to the central asylum seekers' home. 30 years after the riots in Rostock-Lichtenhagen, BILD is now asking how these riots could have happened here."

[Video clip (translation)] "Days ago, a previously unknown interest group had anonymously threatened Lichtenhagen with action. Around 80 asylum seekers arrive every day. Instead of civil protest, now serious riots. Several hundred youths, including right-wing extremists, put the far fewer police officers to flight."

[Content Creator speaking (translation)] "There is a German proverb that says he who sits in a glass house should not throw stones. Because BILD could easily answer its own questions by looking at some of its newspaper articles from the very same year. Here are some of their articles. So in 30 years, BILD has not learned a single lesson from its history. Because they are actively inciting hatred against refugees even more than before. And especially against Muslims. And they seriously think that this double standard won't be exposed. It is up to us to expose this fraud and bring it to the attention of the Ummah."

Creator PT12, Video 1

[Video Text (translation)] "How are Muslims portrayed in films and series? 6 They often play the villain, 5 They are usually aggressive, 4 They are portrayed as terrorists, 3 Oppressors of women, 2 Often as clueless and retarded people, 1 Are barbaric. This image of Muslims has been repeated by the film industry for years, creating these prejudices in people's minds. Anti-Muslim propaganda is carried out on several levels, fuelling negative public discourse about Islam. Which films and series can you think of? Post it in the comments."

Creator PT18, Video 1

[Content Creator speaking (translation)] "Especially to the Muslims, especially to the Muwahhidun. Take a look. Russia has been attacking Ukraine

for about a week now. And, of course, in Europe, but also elsewhere in the world, we see a very clear double standard being played out. Yes? Well, when the Russians attack Syria or Libya, then of course we haven't seen this wave of solidarity with the Muslims who have been killed there. Or, for example, the hatred that is currently being stirred up against Russia worldwide, and that is very, very exaggerated, because it is virtually/, in this fascist system we are currently seeing a Russian hunt, so to speak. Oligarchs are being hunted down, banks are being hunted down, luxury yachts are being hunted down, normal politicians like Gerd Schröder are being hunted down just because he is pro-Putin. Money is being frozen worldwide. In my eyes, this is a fascist hunt for Russians. This situation, although Russia of course also unjustly attacked Ukraine somewhere in the end, is what we saw when the Americans orchestrated the Iraq war in the UN Security Council, through Colin Powell, with a lie, by showing vials and saying that nuclear weapons were being produced here, that the whole war against Iraq was illegal. The whole war against Afghanistan was illegal. All the colonial powers in the last 200, 300 years were illegal.

We see everywhere that these imperialist states have messed around all over the world. They have falsely fiddled along, fiddled along with lies. State empires, state coups. We don't see this reaction at all, as they are showing today towards Putin and the Russian Federation. And what does that mean? It's simply a double standard. We can't/, and of course that goes to us Muslims first. We can't demand justice from them. So, of course, we can say: 'Hey, you Western states, or you imperialist states, or the Russian Federation for that matter, where is justice for you?' They only have justice for their own people. And we see that, for example, with the so-called refugees who are now/, we already have almost half a million within a week. They are streaming towards Europe. There have been many television reporters who have said: 'The Ukrainian refugees are not like the Syrian and Iraqi refugees, because they have white skin and blue eyes. They are from us.' And, of course, you also see Muslims who say, 'That can't be right' and so on, 'Look, the Ukrainian refugees, they behave like that towards them, but when it comes to the Muslim refugees, of course', whereby they themselves are also responsible/bear responsibility because they are exporting weapons to Syria, Libya or other parts of the world. We can't expect them to see our refugees in the same way as their refugees. The way they [...] show it, that's how they actually show it. That's how you normally have to do it. Of course they will behave a thousand times better towards refugees from Ukraine, refugees from Iraq or Afghanistan or Syria or Libya or somewhere else. Why? These

are their people. I mean, we can't say: 'Why, why don't you behave much better towards us?' They behaved reasonably well towards us, they didn't have to take in so many people. What I want to say here is: I don't agree more with some and less with others. For me, they are all equally worthless. I mean the Taghut states. Not the refugees. Refugees are for and all [...], and every oppressed person is an oppressed person for us. We don't ask an oppressed person about their religion or nationality. That has always been the case with us.

What I am saying here is quite different. We cannot demand the solution from the West. That's what I'm saying. We Muslims have to look for the solution ourselves. We can't go somewhere/, we've had problems in our countries for over 150 years. We cannot demand that Europe, or America, let alone Russia, should be the solution to our problems. These people were the ones who brought the problems to our countries. In the beginning, as I said, with the colonial powers, then with enslavement, then with the division into nationalist states and so on, and so on, today with the exploitation of raw materials. We can't ask them, and we don't have this right, to say: 'Bring us justice.' Are we stupid? We are the ones who are usually at the centre of the world's decision-making. Be it in Africa, be it in the Middle East, be it in Turkey or in the wider Eastern world. Most of the world belongs to us Muslims anyway. There is only one thing we have to do. We have to unite. And just as the Kufar unite and form a European Union, form a NATO, form a UN Security Council, we Muslims must of course unite around the Sharia, around Islamic laws, around the Islamic world order, and must proclaim the caliphate. If we do that, we will be the richest state in the world. With the largest area. Much bigger than the Russian Federation. Or the NATO pact, or whatever you want to call it. We can't sit here with our heads in the mud, the mud that came from outside, and say: Yes, we expect the solution from outside. Why do they treat our refugees like that / don't send the refugees away. Why don't we get together, like the whole Muslim world, the official figure is almost two billion. Let's get together and say: Look, we have to take our problems into our own hands. We have to unite. We have to use our raw materials for ourselves. We have to use the oil for ourselves. We have to free ourselves from our taghut states for once. But to come and say that we should look for hope in the West, or in the East for all I know, that is wrong. Hope lies here, clearly. In the book of Allah, in the Sharia. And in ourselves. We Muslims must slowly demand this self-confidence again and, above all, get it back. And then out of this spider's web, out of this imperialist network that has been spun over us, i.e., over the entire Islamic

world, from Morocco to Indonesia, from Afghanistan to Central Africa, that we break this network and say: Hey guys, who are you really? We are going to govern ourselves according to our own system and nobody has to interfere with what kind of state system we govern with. That's the whole system. This is what Surah Ankabut ultimately tells us, especially in the verses that we will try to deal with here today insha Allah."

Creator PT17, Video 1

[Video Text (translation)] "The hijab is our crown."

Creator PT12, Video 2

[Content Creator speaking (translation)] "Headscarves or freedom, that is the narrative that is very often used. So, either you are free and don't wear a hijab. Or you allow yourself to be oppressed and therefore wear the hijab. And I would like to say a few words about this, dear brothers and sisters. We must make it very clear that it is nothing more than a complete illusion to say that the alternative to the hijab is freedom. In this context, I would like to mention a book by the psychologist Rene Engel entitled Beauty sic. In other words, beauty sickness. In this book, she has listed a lot of statistics, including, for example, that according to some surveys of children between the ages of 5 and 9, 40 percent of the 5- to 9-year-olds who were questioned said that they would like to be thinner. Dear brothers and sisters, once again, we are talking about five-, six-, seven-, eight-, nine-year-old children who say they want to be thinner. In another survey it says that 34 percent of 5-year-olds, 5-year-old children who don't even go to school/That 34 per cent of respondents said that they sometimes go on a diet. Let's also remember the scandal with Francis Hogan from Facebook last year, who stated that Facebook's internal research showed that Instagram was causing suicidal thoughts and eating disorders in teenage girls. And what Insta is doing, Facebook and TikTok and Snapchat and YouTube are doing with all the music videos. And the entire entertainment industry. Netflix, films, series, all that just leads to girls being told that you have to look like this actress or that singer and model. In other words, what we definitely need to realize is that the alternative to the hijab is not freedom. The alternative to the hijab means that you have to submit to this society's obsession with beauty. That you have to make sure your body is fit. That you have to spend hours putting on make-up. That you have to undergo surgery until your nose and all other parts of your body are perfect. So that you conform to the ideal, the ideal of beauty in this society. So the choice you are given is either you

submit to Allah wa ta'al by wearing the hijab. Or you submit to this society by submitting to its ideal of beauty. I would also like to mention one more point. It is not difficult to wear the hijab. It's just a piece of fabric, not a lot of weight. But what makes it difficult are the circumstances. In an Islamic society, no one would find it difficult to wear the hijab. Here in this society, in an Islamophobic atmosphere, it is difficult. And that is exactly what makes it so difficult to wear the hijab, the Islamophobic atmosphere. The fact that the headscarf is exploited, exploited, used as a symbol for attacks against Islam. Headscarf debates, that the headscarf is marginalized and demonized. The sisters who wear it are marginalized. All of this makes it difficult to wear the hijab here and that is why, dear brothers and sisters, it is all the more important that we Muslims as a community work against precisely this sentiment. And speak out against precisely this mood so that it will be easier for the sisters, Inshallah, to wear the hijab here in this society in the future."

Creator PT4, Video 1

[Video text (translation)] "Sense & Advantage of the Islamic covering //Now the same woman dressed in Islamic clothing//Conclusion: With the Islamic covering, she was neither stared at nor harassed. So it not only protects her from the sun/heat, but also from being stared at/harassed. Tell the believing men to lower their eyes and guard their shame. That is purer for them. Certainly. Allah is Knowing of what they do. And say to the believing women that they should lower their eyes and guard their shame and not show their jewelry except what is visible. And they should fold their headscarves over the breast slit of their garments and not show their jewelry openly. [...] (Qur'an, 24: 30–31)."

Creator PT16, Video 1

[Content Creator speaking (translation)] "Do you know what I find sad? I find it sad that in 2022 it still matters what country you come from or what religion you are. Let me tell you about a brief situation that happened to me today. I've been looking for a flat for a while now. And I've been in contact with a woman. I know a woman who has connections to a landlady. I went to see her today and she called the landlady and said that I was interested in her flats or one of her flats. And I'm sitting with her right now and she gave me my details and my surname. I have a foreign surname. So, I'm German and have a foreign surname, like that. And in the same breath she said: 'But she's German.' I looked at her like that and thought to myself:

'Why are you mentioning it like that? It's not important at all'. Of course, the landlady doesn't know that I wear a headscarf. But it sounded like this woman was giving the landlady a heads-up. The woman I know is actually really nice. But that just shows me that we unfortunately still have a racism and discrimination problem in 2022."

Creator PT42, Video 1

[Video clip (translation)] "Hijab ban for all employees. And that's a bold […]"

[Content Creator speaking, doing a reaction (translation)] "Does that surprise anyone these days? Banning headscarves at work? Banning headscarves in schools and so on. It doesn't surprise me at all anymore. It simply confirms the hypocrisy we have here. About tolerance and acceptance and all that rubbish. In any case, I'm not shocked at all. But I would be shocked if sisters with headscarves continued to go into this shop and buy products there. I would be very shocked. And not just these sisters, but every woman. And any man who doesn't like what they're doing should stop going there. Understand one thing, people, the shops need you. We don't need the shops. You can find these products somewhere else. Sure, it might be a little harder, but you'll find your products. But if you lose customers, you won't get any more. It's in your hands."

Creator PT1, Video 1

[Content Creator speaking (translation)] "Have you just committed a sin and you regret it? Maybe you are even desperate and you don't know where to go? Are you even afraid because you have committed this sin? I tell you, don't worry. Know that you have a Lord who is all-forgiving. (Allah forgives all sins. The only thing you have to do is to ask him for forgiveness. No matter how great your sin is, ask Allah (foreign language) for forgiveness now. Prostrate with your forehead, yes, to Allah (foreign language), ask for forgiveness and you will see that if you are sincere, He will forgive you and He will guide you right and He will give you better things."

Creator PT28, Video 1

[Content Creator speaking (translation)] "Anas narrated that whenever the Prophet (blessings and peace of Allah be upon him) was worried and distressed, he would say: (speaking in a foreign language). I seek relief in your mercy."

Creator PT20, Video 1

[Video Text (translation)] "Never doubt the mercy of Allah. Allah swt. forgives you for things that you cannot forgive yourself."

Creator PT1, Video 2

[Content Creator speaking (translation)] "[…] Some brothers and sisters, they are only busy uncovering the mistakes of others, seeking out the mistakes of others and presenting them to people. Look, he does it like this, look, he does it like this, look, he does it like this. What about your own mistakes? Would you want someone to do that to you, to your mum, to your dad, to your brother? Would you want someone to take your mistakes, your sins, because no human being is faultless and sinless, and present them to everyone on a golden platter? No? How would you feel if someone did that to you? Yes, you wouldn't want that. Why do you do that to other people? What benefit does it bring you? Does it bring you closer to Allah (foreign language)? Has it made you, your (foreign language) better? Has it increased your iman? Did it make you lose sins or did it make you (foreign language)? Think about it for a moment

Creator PT32, Video 1

[Video Text (translation)] "They cover their hair but emphasize their body all the more. Because somehow you have to please society. They put on body-hugging clothes and call it modern. Dear Ukhti [engl.: Sister], is it really worth it to you? Just for the attention of people. You have taken a big step and covered yourself, but then also take these steps towards Allah and not Shaytan".

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Chapter 3

Social Exclusion and Radicalisation in German Muslim TikTok Users. Presenting Experimental Findings

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This chapter will be published in the *The Routledge International Handbook on Social Exclusion and Radicalisation* (Hotait, 2025). It is written in British English, as required by the publisher. This version differs from the original manuscript in that it has revised table and figure formatting, minor additions to the findings section, inclusion of a regression table in the appendix section, and correction of grammatical errors.

3.1. Introduction

With over one billion users, the short-form video platform TikTok has become one of the most widely used and influential social media platforms in the world (Pappas, 2021). Primarily associated with entertainment, TikTok has gained immense popularity for its diverse and engaging content, its user-friendly content creation tools, and its algorithmically curated "ForYou" page that closely matches users' interests (Bhandari and Bimo, 2022). Notably, TikTok's algorithm facilitates the visibility and virality of content from less-followed accounts, as it does not rely on follower numbers in the way that other social media platforms often do when recommending content (TikTok, 2020), which could be a key contributor to its success by incentivising users to produce content.

Beyond its entertainment value, TikTok has evolved into a space for political activism, community building, and empowerment (Abbas et al., 2022; Cervi and Divon, 2023; Civila et al., 2023). This includes German Muslim TikTok creators, who leverage the platform for political and religious advocacy, knowledge sharing, and raising visibility around their lived experiences as Muslims in Germany (El Sayed and Hotait, 2024; Hotait and Ali, 2024). These creators often address issues such as social exclusion, discrimination, and anti-Muslim racism, promoting awareness and social justice.

However, like other digital spaces, TikTok has been exploited by extremist actors who use the platform to spread propaganda and target audiences, such as German Muslim users (Hartwig et al., 2023; Hotait and Ali, 2024). Among the narratives disseminated by these actors, grievances about social exclusion or injustices faced by Muslims–whether in Germany, the West or internationally–feature prominently. Extremist content creators often frame these grievances as evidence of systemic oppression, identify the culprits, and propose radical solutions and attitudes, such as delegitimising the current political system and advocating its replacement with a fundamentally different and undemocratic government.

While TikTok has garnered global notoriety for its alleged role in fostering radicalisation (Hickey, 2021; Little and Richards, 2021; Rascho, 2024), existing studies have predominantly focused on the production side of extremist content - analysing what is created rather than how it is consumed. Research suggests a connection between types of media consumption and radicalisation (Hassan et al., 2018; Neumann et al., 2018). However, this dynamic remains under-researched on TikTok with regard to the frequency of exposure to extremist videos and their potential contribution to radicalisation, particularly among German Muslim TikTok users.

The fact that German Muslim TikTok users utilise the platform to address their experiences of marginalisation, while simultaneously being potentially targeted by actors seeking to exploit these experiences for propaganda purposes, highlights the need for further investigation into the specific effects of exposure to videos addressing social exclusion and injustice towards Muslims on possible radicalisation. Several studies identify

perceived discrimination, particularly among young people, as a significant risk factor for radicalisation (Emmelkamp et al., 2020). Theoretical frameworks such as anomie theory (Bayat, 2007; Ionescu et al., 2021; Ravn et al., 2019), significance-quest theory (Kruglanski et al., 2022), and strain theory (Agnew, 2010) identify social exclusion, discrimination, and grievances as central factors contributing to an increased susceptibility to radicalisation. They provide causal mechanisms linking these negative experiences to radicalisation, highlighting the role of normlessness, significance deprivation, and stress in driving individuals down this path. The question that remains to be answered is whether consuming content on TikTok that highlights grievances, identifies culprits, or proposes methods for addressing these issues contributes to radicalisation.

At first glance, it may seem redundant to question whether viewing a video on TikTok differs from watching it through other venues. However, the unique contextuality of TikTok could play a significant role. TikTok's algorithm is central to shaping content exposure, curating material based on user interests. This algorithm not only mediates interactions with radical content but can also expose users to preventive or positive material that is widely consumed (Hotait and Ali, 2024), potentially mitigating the risk of radicalisation. Unlike controlled laboratory settings, TikTok engagement patterns evolve more organically. While videos are algorithmically suggested, providing a degree of external influence, users retain voluntary control over whether to engage with a video and how they choose to consume it. Like other social media platforms, TikTok operates within a distinct logic of consumption and sociocultural context, shaping how users engage with and consume videos (Abidin, 2020; Faltesek et al., 2023; Guinaudeau et al., 2022).

Considering these dynamics and the identified research gap, this study examines whether the consumption of videos on TikTok pertaining to the social exclusion of Muslims contributes to radicalisation. To address this question, the chapter presents a field experiment involving German Muslim TikTok users (n = 99). The study explores perceptions and experiences of social exclusion, discrimination, and grievances among Muslims, investigating their potential link to radicalisation, defined here as the "willingness to engage in illegal and violent political action" (Moskalenko and McCauley, 2009, p. 240). To this end, changes in sociopolitical attitudes, particularly perceptions of social exclusion and the political actions considered in response, were surveyed before and after the intervention. Hence, radicalisation in this study was not conceptualised as a binary transition from a non-radical to a radical state but rather as a nuanced shift in the degree of willingness to engage in illegal and violent political action.

3.2. Data and Methods

3.2.1. Data and Sample

The data used in the following analysis is part of the Radicalisation Potentials on TikTok (RaPoTik) project, funded by the Berlin State Commission against Violence. The project focused on collecting data from TikTok users on issues related to extremism and radicalisation. The research design consisted of two parts, the collection of user data and an experimental framework. The sampling and data collection process was carried out by Trend Research, a trend and market research company, which incentivised participants through their access panel. A total of 128 participants were recruited.

Recruitment for the study was conducted across Germany, with an oversample of participants from Berlin. Self-identification as Muslim was a prerequisite for participation in the field experiment and was assessed during the initial screening process before participants were allocated to specific intervention groups. The online screening survey, developed and hosted by Trend Research, was distributed to their access panel. The survey included questions about their state of residence, religious affiliation and TikTok use to ensure that participants were active TikTok users prior to the study. Respondents who expressed interest but did not identify as Muslim (n = 29) were excluded from the field experiment. These individuals were invited to complete a separate survey capturing sociodemographic and attitudinal data and perform a data. Participants from the access panel who did not meet the eligibility criteria were encouraged to share the screening survey with friends and acquaintances they believed might qualify. This extended the recruitment process for additional potential participants. Self-identified Muslims who met the eligibility requirements during the screening were randomly assigned to one of three intervention groups. These groups were exposed to publicly available Islamic content through different methods. Two of the three groups were designated as treatment and control groups and were instructed to follow a TikTok account managed by the project team. This account uploaded one of 14 unique videos daily over 14 days.

The TikTok treatment group (hereafter "treatment group", n = 34) was exposed to potentially radicalising videos, and the TikTok control group (hereafter "control group", n = 32) was exposed to positive or preventative videos. The videos were selected and identified as a result of previous qualitative fieldwork and did not contain violent, graphic or illegal content, but rather content that promoted particular arguments and prescriptions. Potentially radicalising videos were defined as those that either promoted religiously dogmatic, intolerant, monist, anti-pluralist, sectarian or takfiri views, or advocated religiously motivated political prescriptions. Political aspects included delegitimising democratic governments, promoting their replacement with non-democratic systems, or expressing revisionist aspirations such as the restoration of the Ottoman Caliphate. Videos that highlight grievances - such as the social exclusion of Muslims - while blaming entire political

systems, media or governance structures rather than specific perpetrators (e.g. right-wing groups and politicians) were also included. While not explicitly extremist, such content could, under certain circumstances, create openings for problematic actions and ideologies. For a detailed understanding of the qualitative groundwork and coding procedures, refer to Hotait and Ali (2024).

Before and after the intervention period, participants completed a survey on sociodemographic, political, religious and social attitudinal measures corresponding to radicalisation and extremism. Apart from following the account, participants were instructed to use TikTok as they normally would. This was done to reconstruct a more natural TikTok environment and thus understand how exposure to potentially radicalising content unfolds on the platform. To contrast this environment, the third intervention group was not asked to follow a TikTok account, but to complete a single survey that asked the same attitudinal questions at the beginning and end, but in between had participants watch the same videos as the treatment group in full (n = 33). The rationale here was to compare this to the more dynamic environment of TikTok, where content curation is dictated by the recommendation algorithm and people may or may not watch the videos in full or at all. After answering all the questions, all treatment groups had to answer questions about the videos used in each group, such as whether they agreed with the statements or remembered their content.

The main ethical concern was the potential negative impact on participants from watching the videos during the experiment. For this reason, both the survey and treatment groups were required to watch an educational and preventative video at the end of the study period. This video critically analysed the content and arguments presented in the experimental videos and offered alternative perspectives[1].

With a few exceptions, the characteristics of the different treatment groups were similar (see Table 3.1). The average (mean) age of the participants, as well as the median, was around 30 years, reflecting TikTok's predominantly young user base. Nevertheless, the sample included participants from different age groups. There was a slight gender imbalance, with more women than men in the sample, particularly in the control group. In line with the demographic context of Muslims in Germany, most participants had a migrant background. A person was considered to have a migrant background if he or she or at least one parent was born outside Germany, as defined by the German Federal Statistical Office (Bundesamt, 2024). The majority of those with a migration background in our sample had Turkish or Arabic-speaking origins, consistent with the general German Muslim demography (Pfündel et al., 2021). Regarding education, a significant portion of participants held higher education degrees, especially in the survey group, where nearly 50% had completed university or college. If left unaccounted for, the gender and education

[1]Ethical approval for the study was obtained from the Ethics Commission of Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin (Application No. HU-KSBF-EK_2023_0004).

Table 3.1. Sample characteristics by treatment group

Characteristic	Survey (n=33)	Control (n=32)	Treatment (n=34)
Age, mean (sd)	30.1 (10.4)	31.8 (9.1)	31.3 (10)
Age, median	28	29.5	30.5
Sex, n (%)			
Male	14 (42.4%)	8 (25%)	11 (32.4%)
Female	19 (57.6%)	24 (75%)	23 (67.6%)
Migration Background, n (%)			
No	6 (18.2%)	1 (3.1%)	6 (17.6%)
Yes	27 (81.8%)	31 (96.9%)	28 (82.4%)
Origin, n (%)			
Turkish	15 (45.5%)	18 (56.2%)	15 (44.1%)
Arabic speaking	10 (30.3%)	10 (31.2%)	7 (20.6%)
Persian speaking	0 (0%)	3 (9.4%)	5 (14.7%)
Other	2 (6.1%)	0 (0%)	2 (5.9%)
Professional Education, n (%)			
None	1 (3%)	1 (3.1%)	1 (2.9%)
Other (not specified)	6 (18.2%)	5 (15.6%)	9 (26.5%)
Non-formal/Entry-Level Training	0 (0%)	2 (6.2%)	1 (2.9%)
Vocational Education	10 (30.3%)	16 (50%)	15 (44.1%)
Higher Education	16 (48.5%)	8 (25%)	8 (23.5%)
Religiosity [10-1], mean (sd)	3.5 (2)	3 (2)	3.2 (1.8)

biases could influence the estimates of radicalisation, as research shows that male gender and lower educational level have a (small) effect on radicalisation (Emmelkamp et al., 2020). Additionally, on a scale from 1 (very religious) to 10 (not religious at all), participants, on average, described themselves as somewhat religious, with a mean score across all groups of around 3.

6 of the 14 videos watched by the treatment and survey groups directly addressed the social exclusion, discrimination and oppression of Muslims in Germany or internationally (see Table 3.3). All of them mentioned current and persistent anti-Muslim racism and

anti-Islamic sentiment. However, all of them also made fundamental criticism, seeing the political establishment and the media as a whole as responsible. Two offered politically sanctioned prescriptions, such as educational activism, and one explicitly called for these governments to be replaced by an Islamic one. These videos were therefore of two types. Firstly, videos that explored Muslim grievances, from which we can observe whether they politically mobilise participants and whether this leads to the consideration of radical political means. Second, a video that explored Muslim grievances and advocated a fundamentally different alternative to the existing governments.

3.2.2. Analytical Strategy and Measures

The subsequent findings concentrate on two key areas: the perception and experience of social exclusion and discrimination against Muslims in Germany, and the strategies participants considered to address or combat these issues. The question on exclusion and discrimination in Germany was as follows (translated from German) "To what extent do you agree with the following statement?" with the following scenarios:

1. "In Germany, laws are passed that I religiously disagree with, but they do not force me to commit sinful actions".
2. "In Germany, laws are passed that I religiously disagree with and that force me to commit sinful actions".
3. "In Germany, laws are passed that result in Muslims being excluded from resources, professions, and institutions".
4. "Muslims are predominantly discriminated against in German society".
5. "I observe that Muslims in Germany are, overall, practicing Islam less and less".
6. "German society pressures me to act against my religious beliefs".

The response options were: Strongly agree, somewhat agree, neither agree nor disagree, somewhat disagree, strongly disagree, don't know and no answer. After expressing their agreement or disagreement with these statements, the participants had to answer that if these scenarios were true, what means would they use to exert influence, to express their point of view, adopted from the German General Social Survey (Allgemeine Bevölkerungsumfrage der Sozialwissenschaften), short ALLBUS (GESIS-Leibniz-Institut für Sozialwissenschaften, 2021). A list of various political actions was presented, from which two were categorised as illegal or violent political actions as follows:

- Civil disobedience, which includes taking part in an unauthorised protest, occupying houses, factories or offices, causing a real ruckus at a demonstration, even if some things are damaged, and taking part in a traffic blockade.

- Violence, which includes fighting for a cause, even if it involves violence against people and intimidation of political opponents.

Scenarios that participants strongly or somewhat agreed with were summed into an indicator ranging from 0 for no scenarios to 6 for all scenarios agreed with. Similarly, for both the civil disobedience and violence variables, an indicator was created by adding up all the scenarios in which a participant would use either of these means, again ranging from 0 to 6 respectively. Given the experimental design, there were two main elements of comparison: the three different treatment groups and the two time points, before and after exposure.

Descriptive results are presented showing the number of people who generally agreed with the scenarios presented, the political actions they would take, and how these numbers changed for the different treatment groups before and after the intervention. Results are also presented through multivariate linear regression models (OLS) of the individual change before and after treatment of these indicators ($E[Y_{post} - Y_{pre}]$) on treatment group status and the covariates of gender, age, education, religiosity (see Table 3.1) and the number of aspects on which the participants felt discriminated against in the past 12 months (e.g. gender, religion, ethnicity, health). By averaging the expected values across treatment groups, the comparison of treatment groups allows for an approximation of a difference-in-differences estimation. All of the covariates were found to have some effect, either positive or negative, on (violent) radicalisation or delinquency (Baier and Wright, 2001; Beelmann, 2020; Brettfeld and Wetzels, 2011; Carol et al., 2020; Emmelkamp et al., 2020). Regression plots always include the effects of the treatment groups, variables whose effects are significant at different levels and, as it pertains to the topic of this chapter, the discrimination variable. The findings are further supported by contextual evidence drawn from participant responses to the videos, including open-ended answers and indications of whether participants remembered or agreed with the content. This evidence helps address the question of whether exposure to such videos on TikTok influences radicalisation, while also considering potential confounding factors that may contribute to this effect.

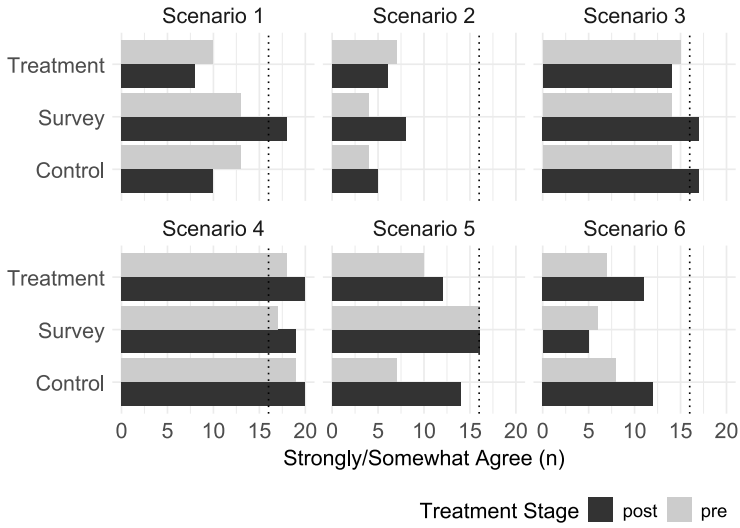
3.3. Findings

3.3.1. Descriptive Findings

The level of agreement with the scenarios varies across scenarios and treatment groups. Scenarios 3 and 4 - addressing (structural) discrimination of Muslims in German law and society and hence highlighting Muslims in Germany as a social group - consistently showed higher levels of agreement. In any treatment group at any intervention stage, between 14 and 20 participants (43 to 63%) expressed agreement with these scenarios (see Figure 3.1). Less agreement was found with scenarios that focus on the religious perspective

of being a Muslim in Germany, namely scenarios 1, 2 and 6 – that German law and society are in some way opposed to religious practice. However, there was only a slight increase in agreement regarding structural exclusionary practices after the intervention. A small number of participants, regardless of the treatment group, showed increased agreement with scenario 4, while for scenario 3, this increase was observed specifically in the survey and control groups. In both cases, the increase ranged from 1 to 3 participants.

Figure 3.1. Number of participants agreeing with different scenarios by treatment group and stage



Dotted line = 16, approximately half of the participants in each treatment group

Increased agreement was also found across different treatment groups for scenarios involving religious discrimination, such as the survey group for scenario 1 (5 participants) and both the treatment and control groups for scenario 6 (4 and 5 participants). This could be attributed to the other treatment videos, which focused more on religious practices than on discrimination against Muslims as a social group in Germany and the West, as shown in Table 3.3.

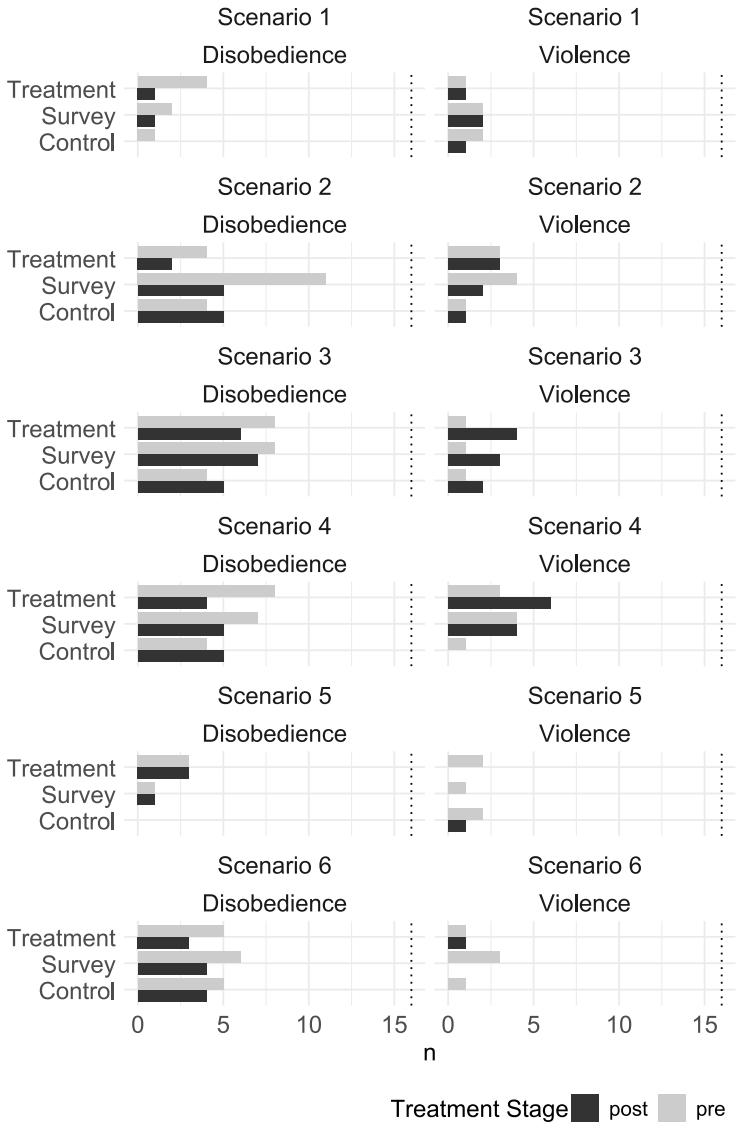
Similarly, while the changes in participants' preferences for different forms of government before and after the intervention would have been a substantive finding in relation to social exclusion (see Figure 3.5), these changes could also be related to the content of the other intervention videos. Nevertheless, a slight decrease in support for democratic governments was observed after the intervention, with a reduction of 1 participant in the treatment group and 3 participants in the survey group. Larger shifts were observed among participants who expressed increased support for an authoritarian leader, with 6 participants in the treatment group showing this change. Similarly, a shift towards

greater support for a technocratic government was noted, involving 4 participants in the treatment group and 6 in the control group. Whilst not causally substantiated in this study, this finding is suggestive of the hypothesis that perceived in-group injustice - an experience ubiquitous among German Muslims due to the pervasive reality of anti-Muslim racism in Germany - may lead to a loss of confidence in the current form of government to adequately represent and address issues relevant to Muslims.

This, in turn, could increase the desire for alternative forms of government that are believed to be better suited to these purposes. Little change was observed in support for religious law, suggesting that participants were more focused on the socio-political discrimination of Muslims than on the theological content of the videos advocating for religious law. This remains the case even though one of the treatment videos specifically referenced the establishment of an Islamic state as a reaction to the oppression of Muslims.

Analogous to the findings above, the only noteworthy changes in the number of participants more willing to use violence to exert influence were observed in relation to Scenarios 3 and 4, specifically within the treatment group, where 3 additional participants expressed this willingness (see Figure 3.2). This provides evidence for the significance of injustices and grievances experienced as a societal group acting as a cognitive opener for radicalisation, particularly since these changes were observed in the treatment groups exposed to material highlighting Muslim grievances. However, the differences in the number of participants willing to resort to civil disobedience or violence remain minimal or non-existent across all scenarios, both before and after the intervention. The number of participants endorsing such actions is small and far from constituting a majority, regardless of treatment group or stage. This indicates that the overwhelming majority of participants do not perceive these political actions as necessary responses to social exclusion.

Figure 3.2. Number of participants willing to use either civil disobedience or violence if the given scenario were true, by treatment group and stage



Dotted line = 16, approximately half of the participants in each treatment group

3.3.2. Multivariate Analysis

Although the treatment condition was assigned via random assignment, the various variables outlined in the methodology section are also associated with extremism and

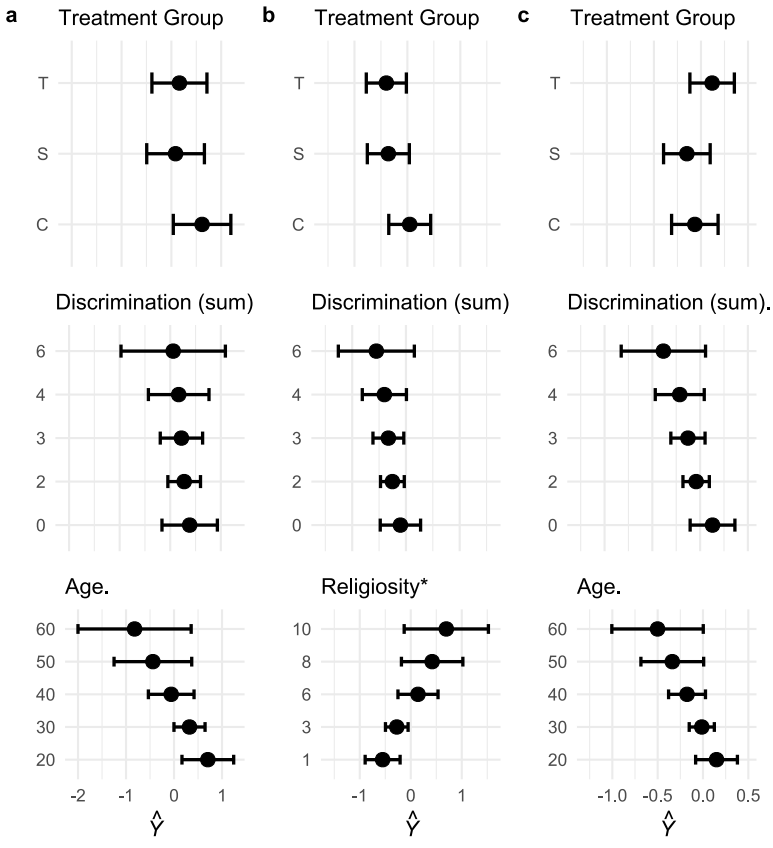
radicalisation. To avoid omitting possible confounders, three multivariate regression models on the treatment groups and relevant covariates were performed (see Figure 3.3 and Table 3.4). In sum, there was no significant effect of the treatment group on any dependent variable, nor was there a sizable effect. Although the effect size is negligible, individuals in each group reported slightly more experiences of discrimination after the intervention than before, with an increase of fewer than one additional scenario they agreed with on average (Figure 3.3a). Also, the treatment group showed a small, nonsignificant edge toward more scenarios in which they would consider using violent acts (Figure 3.3c). The predicted value for the treatment group was approximately 0.12, indicating less than a 15% change towards endorsing one additional scenario involving violence. In contrast, the effect sizes for the control and survey groups were slightly negative, at around -0.07 and -0.15, respectively. This results in a difference of around 0.18 to 0.27 compared to the treatment group, equivalent to roughly a fifth to a quarter of a scenario on average - indicating a relatively small difference. A pairwise comparison of the fitted values for the treatment group, using estimated marginal means, rendered this difference statistically insignificant, with p-values of 0.53 and 0.28, respectively.

Looking at Figure 3.4, the results are heterogeneous in nature. Although more people in each treatment group agreed with discriminatory or exclusionary scenarios, there were also many cases where the opposite was suggested to be true. The same applies to changes in attitudes towards choosing violence in the treatment group, which again show little change after the intervention. Notably, the control group only showed changes towards fewer scenarios being considered violent, but not more. Overall, the heterogeneous effects likely highlight the influence of unaccounted confounding factors–potentially including variations in the stylistic reception of the messages, differences in psychological resilience to radical content, or the impact of other online material participants were exposed to. The latter would suggest complex treatment contamination or spillover effects, highlighting the importance of controlling for overall content exposure in digital field experiments of this kind.

Age appears to be negatively associated with both perceived discrimination and willingness to use violence. Specifically, after the intervention, older participants reported less discrimination and fewer scenarios in which they would resort to violence for. This aligns with existing research, which generally finds that with age, or rather between first- to second-generation immigrant, reports of harassment and discriminatory experiences tend to decrease (van Tubergen and Kros, 2024). This reduction is also attributed to the heightened awareness and education among first-generation immigrants, who are more conscious of their experiences. A further indication of this is the statistically significant association between higher (professional) education and increased recognition of discriminatory scenarios (see Table 3.4). In addition, as shown in the literature, the prevalence of radical views tends to decrease with age (Acevedo and Chaudhary, 2015; Ellis et al., 2021).

Traditionally, religiosity is associated with lower levels of delinquency and violence

Figure 3.3. Effect plot of the linear regression (OLS) of changes before and after treatment



T = Treatment, S = Survey, C = Control

***p<0.001, **p<0.01, *p<0.05, .p<0.1

in **a)** number of scenarios agreed with, **b)** number of scenarios willing to use civil disobedience for if the scenarios were true, **c)** number of scenarios willing to use violence for if the scenarios were true. Covariates: treatment group, gender, age, professional education level, religiosity, and number of aspects on which participants felt discriminated against in the past 12 months (Discrimination sum).

(Baier and Wright, 2001; Brettfeld and Wetzels, 2011; Carol et al., 2020). Self-reported religiosity showed no statistically significant or substantial effect in any of the models, except in the model predicting changes in the number of scenarios where individuals were willing to engage in civil disobedience. In this case, higher religiosity was associated with a lower willingness to engage in civil disobedience. The difference in predicted values

between the highest level of religiosity (1) and the lowest (10) was 1.25, indicating that highly religious individuals were estimated to resort to civil disobedience in slightly more than one fewer scenario on average compared to those who were not religious at all, confirming the existing literature.

3.3.3. Contextual Evidence

Considering the measured effects, which on average appear to be small and partially heterogeneous, it is important to contextualise the interactions between TikTok users and content. This allows us to understand which practices mediate the effect that content consumption may or may not have on radicalisation. As TikTok curates content through its recommendation algorithm, it acts as a link between the consumer and the content. Therefore, it is important to understand whether content that is argued to enable radicalisation of any kind is actually recommended and then actually consumed. After indicating their values and attitudes at the end of the 14-day intervention period, participants in both the treatment and control groups were presented with short snippets of the videos uploaded to the account they were asked to follow.

Table 3.2. Summary of Participant Responses Post-Treatment for Video Content Engagement in Treatment and Survey Group (see Table 3.3), n (%)

	Treatment Group				Survey Group
Video	Seen	Watched Fully	Remember Content	Agree	Agree
1	16 (47.1%)	9 (26.5%)	13 (38.2%)	8 (23.5%)	15 (45.5%)
2	16 (47.1%)	9 (26.5%)	9 (26.5%)	3 (8.8%)	15 (45.5%)
3	18 (52.9%)	13 (38.2%)	9 (26.5%)	2 (5.9%)	10 (30.3%)
4	13 (38.2%)	5 (14.7%)	3 (8.8%)	2 (5.9%)	6 (18.2%)
5	9 (26.5%)	4 (11.8%)	3 (8.8%)	1 (2.9%)	7 (21.2%)
6	7 (20.6%)	3 (8.8%)	2 (5.9%)	0 (0%)	5 (15.2%)

In Table 3.2 we can see that the minority of participants, with one exception, claimed to have seen the video on their ForYou page. Given that many people claimed not to have seen a video on their ForYou page, even fewer watched it in full and also remembered and agreed with its content. This is particularly true of video 6, which not only talked about grievances, but also offered a political prescription that no one agreed with. When compared to the survey group who watched the video in full and were able to recall its content, as they gave their opinion on these videos immediately afterward, we can see that

agreement is higher for all videos, probably because everyone has seen them. Again, this is particularly true of video 6, where only five out of 33 people agreed with the content of the video. So, the key message is that if we assume that exposure to certain content online can lead to radicalisation, then the recommendation algorithms of social media platforms are ultimately mediating that. In this relationship, we have to acknowledge that most people do not remember seeing a video on their feed, watching it in full, remembering its content and then agreeing with it. Therefore, there are different levels of content engagement that contextualise whether a particular video on TikTok can actually influence radicalisation.

Looking at the video performance metrics that TikTok gives us for our videos, we can verify that hardly any participant watched a video in its entirety; in fact, most videos were watched for no more than about 20 seconds per video on average, sometimes even less. This speaks to the way people consume content on TikTok and swipe through their feeds. This raises the question of whether arguments made within videos after a period of 20 seconds are perceived at all. A striking example of a recurring pattern of content consumption in our study involved a participant in the treatment group who "liked" all of the videos in the intervention, including one of a mosque being vandalized with racist and anti-Islamic remarks (Video 3, Table 3.3), which she even saved. However, when recalling the content of the video and whether it was convincing, she stated (translated from German) "I was not convinced. I was rather shocked by the things that were mentioned in the video". This person mostly showed no changes or changes towards less radical views after the experiment. This shows that even liking and saving certain videos does not mean that one agrees with all the messages in them, but in this case rather resonates with parts of them without accepting the underlying message, in this case, that German politics and media as a whole are responsible for this act. The practice of liking was quite excessive for this participant. Her user data showed that she liked about 1000 videos in the intervention period, suggesting that the inflationary use may carry less meaning or endorsement per se. Another participant, who actually showed little change with less radical views in the treatment group, watches an average of 465 Tiktok videos daily according to her user data donation, and sifting through it, it appears that she watches a lot of Islamic content, which represents her overall high self-reported religiosity. Therefore, I hypothesize that she is exposed to an abundance of other Islamic material that could also have a counteracting effect. Exactly this dynamic, what is actually consumed alongside the problematic material, the actual content suggestion itself, needs to be further investigated using more sophisticated statistical models that can handle the large amount of user data generated.

3.4. Discussion

In summary, this study found little difference between the treatment groups in terms of change in their perceptions of social exclusion and discrimination against Muslims,

and their willingness to engage in illegal (civil disobedience) or violent behaviour. At baseline, the willingness to use such tools of contestation was low. However, the pre-post changes were found to be partly heterogeneous, with some people changing their opinions towards and against illegal and violent political means. We argue that contextual evidence highlights how engagement patterns, including those influenced by recommendation algorithms, play a role in mediating the effect between content exposure and radicalisation. That said, the study has several methodological limitations. Foremost, an intervention period of 14 days is short, given that radicalisation is a gradual process involving long-term adaptations in ideologies and behavioural patterns. However, this study was able to demonstrate the extent to which change can occur in a short period of time. First, it offers a critical counter perspective on public beliefs about TikTok, which lean towards alarmism and talk about "overnight radicalisation", for example (Tagesspiegel, 2024).

Secondly, given the gravity of radicalisation as a concerning and socially significant phenomenon, particularly as it involves the potential use of violent and illegal means for political purposes, we must consider the following question: how many individuals exhibiting negative changes in attitude constitute a relevant socio-political effect? The findings of this study indicate that the majority of individuals do not undergo significant changes during this period, given the quantity and substance of the intervention, thereby providing a counterbalance to potential moral panic surrounding TikTok and radicalisation. However, the fact that even a small proportion of individuals (e.g., a few out of 100) might consider violence warrants attention. Although the phenomenon of radicalisation among TikTok users does not appear to be as pervasive as often assumed, the existence of such cases does highlight the necessity of studying their trajectories over an extended period. After all, aren't a few willing to resort to violence not a few too many?

In addition, given the sensitivity around the subject of radicalisation, it is likely that selection bias and social desirability bias were at play in this study, i.e. the types of people who participate in a study may not represent those who hold problematic values, and participants may be less open to sensitive questions about illegal acts. However, it is important to put this into perspective, as these users may also be representative of the average TikTok user, allowing the relationship between social exclusion and radicalisation to be assessed for the typical user, and therefore the risk of typical TikTok use.

Finally, the study faced challenges related to unobserved heterogeneity. Firstly, it was limited in accounting for real-life experiences outside the experimental context that could have influenced both TikTok consumption and socio-political attitudes. While the discrimination variable provided some measure, it was insufficient to capture the full scope of these influences. Secondly, given that the field experiment focused on TikTok users, it is important to acknowledge that participants were likely pre-exposed to content similar to the videos used in the study. Hence, future research should incorporate user data to classify participants' topics of interest and consumption patterns, integrating these as covariates in the analysis model. The RaPoTik project has collected such user data,

identifying close to one million videos, which are currently being analysed using natural language processing (NLP) models. This step will be included in future analyses of the dataset, addressing these limitations more comprehensively.

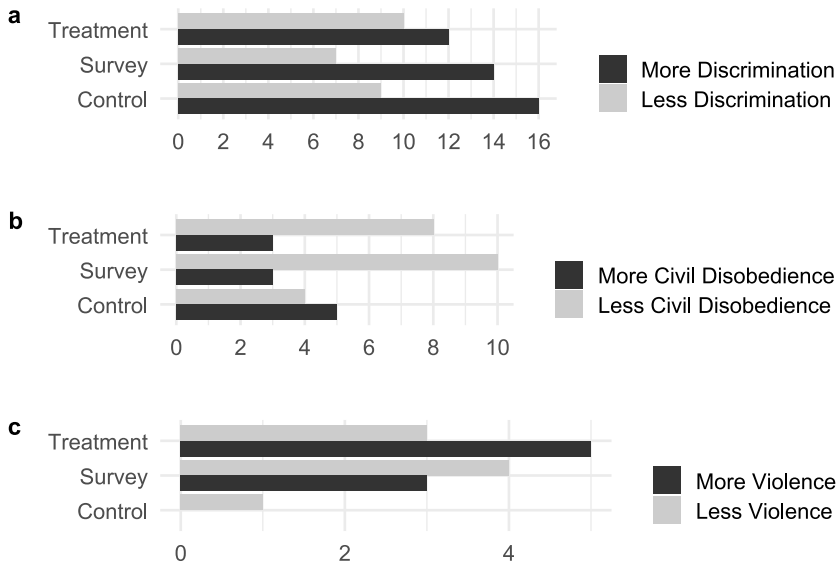
Whilst the phenomenon of radicalisation on and through TikTok remains largely elusive, this study offers novel insights. It measured the effects of content exposure over short periods of time, identified contextual parameters that mediate possible TikTok radicalisation, and addressed methodological limitations. Collectively, these contributions represent an important milestone in advancing our understanding and guiding future research in this field.

3.A Appendix

Table 3.3. Description of videos dealing with social exclusion, discrimination, and oppression of Muslims

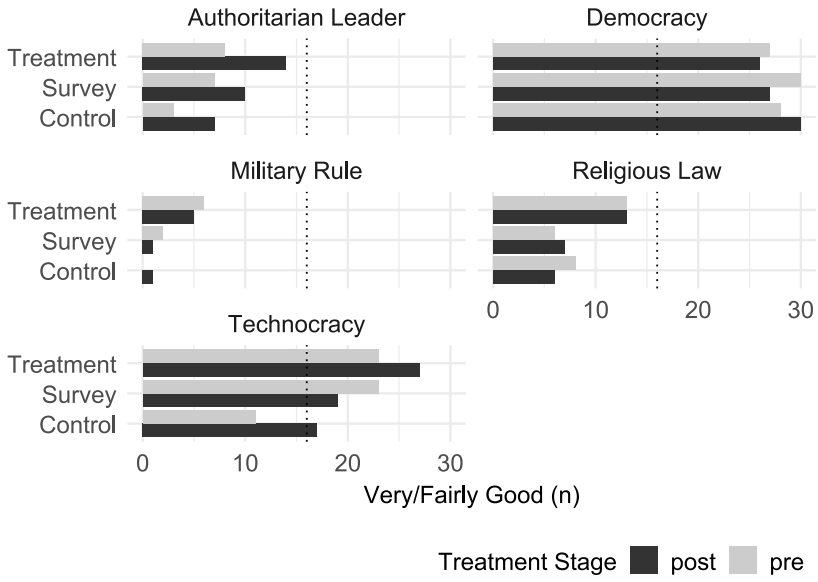
Video	Political Context	Key Political Stance	Given Prescription
1	A Belgian woman sued a company for denying her an internship due to her hijab, but the European Court ruled in favor of the company	Western governments systematically discriminate against Muslims, especially women, through neutrality laws	Don't get intimidated, educate your environment
2	A pregnant Muslim woman in Berlin was insulted, spat on, and punched in the stomach by an anti-Muslim racist in broad daylight	(German) politics and media embolden Islamophobes	Bring attention to these acts
3	Anti-Islamic/racist phrases were smeared on the walls of a German mosque	The true culprits are (German) politics and media, which foster anti-Muslim sentiments	None
4	A documentary on a Salafi influencer by a state-funded media group	State media targets orthodox Islamic values and promotes a so-called liberal Islam	None
5	The oppression and imprisonment of Uyghur Muslims	Western governments support Ukraine but won't do the same for the Uyghurs	None
6	The oppression and imprisonment of Uyghur/Rohingya Muslims	Western and Islamic governments are doing nothing against this	Distrust Western governments, reject current Islamic governments, and establish an alternative Islamic state

Figure 3.4. Number of participants who changed attitudes after intervention



Regarding **a)** perceived discrimination, **b)** willingness to use civil disobedience, **c)** willingness to use violence

Figure 3.5. Number of participants rating different forms of government as "very good" or "fairly good" by treatment group and stage



Dotted line = 16, approximately half of the participants in each treatment group

Table 3.4. OLS-Regression Table (β)

	Dependent variable:		
	Discrimination	Civil Disob.	Violence
	(1)	(2)	(3)
Survey (Ref: Control)	−0.532	−0.404	−0.085
	(0.422)	(0.290)	(0.181)
Treatment (Ref: Control)	−0.455	−0.442	0.184
	(0.400)	(0.274)	(0.171)
Female (Ref: Male)	−0.162	0.270	−0.106
	(0.360)	(0.247)	(0.154)
Age	−0.038*	0.002	−0.016*
	(0.020)	(0.014)	(0.008)
Vocational Education (Ref: None, other, or entry-level)	0.945**	0.046	0.098
	(0.445)	(0.305)	(0.190)
Higher Education (Ref: None, other, or entry-level)	1.391***	−0.080	0.098
	(0.452)	(0.310)	(0.193)
Religiosity	0.057	0.139**	−0.031
	(0.086)	(0.059)	(0.037)
Discrimination (sum)	−0.054	−0.075	−0.086*
	(0.119)	(0.082)	(0.051)
Constant	0.985	−0.501	0.698*
	(0.842)	(0.577)	(0.360)
Observations	99	99	99
R^2	0.125	0.105	0.092
Adjusted R^2	0.047	0.025	0.011
Residual Std. Error (df = 90)	1.608	1.102	0.688
F Statistic (df = 8; 90)	1.607	1.316	1.136

Note: *p<0.1; **p<0.05; ***p<0.01

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Discussion

Chapter Summaries

Research Questions 1 and 2

The chapters of this dissertation have each included discussions that summarize, conclude, and contextualize their respective findings. In this section, I aim to recapitulate and synthesize the findings, demonstrate how they address the research questions, and elaborate on their limitations. Research questions 1 and 2 were stated as follows:

RQ 1 What topics and issues do German Muslims address in their TikTok content?

RQ 2 How does this content relate to religion, (anti-Muslim) grievances, and radical ideologies?

Through the in-depth qualitative analysis of 320 videos by 32 female Muslim content creators on TikTok in Chapter 1, a wide range of topics and issues emerged. The most prominent topics included personal and social life–such as relationships, family life, and daily routines–as well as beauty, style, and fashion. In addition, creators frequently shared general lifestyle content, including product hauls, unboxings, self-care routines, food vlogs, and DIY projects. This demonstrates that female content creators on TikTok largely adhere to, or are shaped by, the platform's broader norms of self-marketability and, to some extent, self-commodification. While they address important issues in their own lives, their content is also consistent with TikTok's nature as an entertainment-driven platform where engagement, authenticity, and relatability are key currencies. This is further highlighted by how creators use TikTok's technical capabilities–experimenting with different video formats, incorporating trending sounds and templates, and interacting with user comments or other creators' content to generate reciprocity. In particular, they employ a variety of content styles, ranging from traditional speech-based or essay-style presentations of information and arguments to more dynamic and engaging techniques such as comedy, acting, storytelling, and creative sequencing of images.

These social, cultural, and technical logics of TikTok extend to content related to religion, theology, lived religion, the hijab, and the experience of wearing it, as well

as social justice and political advocacy. These topics are particularly prominent among female Muslim content creators. While the aforementioned topics are consistent with mainstream content on the platform, these subjects are specific to the lived experiences and identities of (female) Muslims in Germany. Many of these videos use traditional presentation formats to facilitate content sharing, but creators also incorporate comedic and interactive elements to challenge societal stereotypes, expectations, and stigmas. In doing so, they creatively impart religious knowledge, critique cultural norms within Muslim communities, and educate the public about the social injustices they face in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, and gender. This type of content functions as both activism and advocacy, blending it with entertainment. Grievances related to being Muslim, female, or one's ethnicity are dominant issues in their content and serve as a means of activism that is not only relatable and engaging but also empowering and agency-giving. As such, TikTok becomes a third space for Muslim women–a platform that allows them to address these issues and raise awareness. Religion, religiosity, social exclusion, discrimination, and racism are thus not only integral to the identities of these content creators but also key motivations for their creative engagement.

TikTok provides digital spaces for Muslims to address the grievances they face and find avenues of expression that are more open and accessible than those offered by previous forms of digital representation, such as private forums. The platform's algorithm, in particular its feature of not overly prioritizing the number of followers an account has for videos to perform well or gain visibility, allows smaller accounts the opportunity to achieve virality. This can encourage marginalized individuals, who may struggle to find visibility and representation in the non-digital world, to become creators themselves. In effect, TikTok promotes agency and encourages positive activism within these communities. However, this increased visibility comes with challenges. Creators make themselves more vulnerable to hate speech and harassment while relying on an algorithm that may not prioritize content that addresses the specific issues facing German Muslims per se, but rather content that is broadly popular and entertaining. As a result, their visibility is often limited to specific audiences, potentially reducing their reach to audiences that could benefit from greater awareness of these issues.

At the same time, TikTok's algorithmic dynamics may also complicate the challenge posed by extremist actors, allowing them to move from the margins of society into the digital mainstream and increasing the number of individuals creating and disseminating radical propaganda. Chapter 2 explores these ambiguities in more detail. Through a content analysis of nearly 3,000 videos from 43 accounts, this chapter examines how content ideologically aligns with established indicators of radicalism, or whether opposing indications are present. Our findings reveal that both religious and theological advocacy, as well as narratives of Muslim grievance and victimization, serve as key points of divergence in how Muslims are represented and how these representations relate to radicalism.

In Chapter 1, I demonstrated how Muslim women use TikTok as a platform to

advise other Muslims on religious matters relevant to their lived experiences as Muslim women in the West. Similarly, and as expected, the most common topic among Islamic content creators was religious advocacy. These topics often revolved around lifestyle issues, providing spiritual guidance, life motivation, guidance on kinship and family life, morality, gender issues, and questions of what is permissible or impermissible. Much like the creators discussed in Chapter 1, these content creators can arguably be seen as taking on the role of educators and role models, offering a voice on issues relevant to the lives of Muslims in the West. This is particularly relevant in areas where such issues are not yet institutionalized or widely addressed due to the minority status of Muslims in Germany. As such, these issues inherently have a socially inclusive function, as they reflect the issues and struggles of living as a minority in a non-Muslim, pluralistic, and diverse society. These creators address questions of finding one's place, navigating social and moral challenges, and determining what is right or wrong, permissible or impermissible–in essence, exploring the conditions of being part of German or other Western societies.

Given their minority status and the lack of ubiquitous religious role models, institutions, and even accessible knowledge, self-appointed religious educators, scholars, and apologists emerge to fill this gap by providing religious knowledge. This may be manifested as pastoral care, preaching mercy, ideological and social pluralism, interfaith harmony, and solidarity. However, due to the marginalization of these communities and the corresponding lack of spaces for positive religious education and representation offline, audiences seeking knowledge and guidance may also encounter content that promotes a more exclusionary interpretation of religion. This type of content uses issues of social and private life, as well as moral and religious guidance, to propagate negative attitudes towards religious minorities, plurality, and the socio-political order in which they live. In doing so, it fills ideological gaps by presenting a version of religion that positions those who would adopt it as inherently distant from the socio-political realities and norms of the wider society.

While not inherently indicative of radicalism, victimization emerged as the most prominent indicator in Chapter 2 that could potentially facilitate radicalization. While advocacy topics in lifestyle-oriented content often revolved around negotiating life and religion in the West, victimization-related content tended to focus more on political issues. These topics included criticism of Western hypocrisy in its treatment of Muslims and Muslim-majority nations, the portrayal of Muslims in the media, the headscarf debate, the war in the Middle East, crime, and incidents of discrimination. Similar to Chapter 1, we found that many individuals used TikTok as a space for activism and awareness-raising, advocating for interfaith harmony, solidarity, and justice. However, in contrast to Chapter 1, where creators confidently asserted their place in Germany and advocated for equality and social change, some actors engaged in delegitimizing the socio-political order, both in Germany and abroad. Some even expressed revisionist aspirations, e.g. presenting the restoration of the Ottoman Caliphate as a religious-political duty and the only viable

solution to the said grievances.

Ideological narratives as such can be mapped within the three components of adapting radical group ideology outlined by Kruglanski and Webber (2014): grievance, culprit, and method. These actors highlight the pervasive structures and events in which Muslims, particularly in Germany, see themselves as victims of negative media coverage, discrimination, social exclusion, and even violence. The identified culprit is often systemic in nature, framing the corresponding problem as deliberately designed to oppress and subjugate Muslims. Consequently, the proposed solution is framed as the need for sweeping political change, advocating the removal or replacement of the existing system with something entirely different. These actors problematize the lived experiences and vulnerabilities of Muslims, using them as entry points to direct individuals toward their ideology and methods. They offer a sense of purpose by providing a "quest," whether by advocating radical change, rejecting the legitimacy of existing socio-political norms, or promoting anti-democratic governance and political values. In addition, they present methods for taking action against those perceived to be responsible for the grievances experienced by Muslims.

So, what topics and issues do German Muslims address in their TikTok content, and how does this content relate to religion, (anti-Muslim) grievances, and radical ideologies? German Muslim TikTokers share many similarities with their peers, but they are also distinct in some ways. They discuss mundane, secular, entertaining, and serious topics related to their lives and experiences. They also discuss religion, theology, political issues, and their lives as Muslims, often engaging in advocacy and activism. Two distinct types of content were particularly prominent among these creators. The first focuses on navigating life as a Muslim in general, and specifically in a non-Muslim majority context, by offering religious guidance. The second addresses experiences and perceived grievances, including discrimination, marginalization, and related issues. This content can relate to radical ideologies by using the experiences and needs of their audiences as entry points to propagate ideas whose adoption could constitute radicalization. But it also serves as a counterforce, claiming space to represent and advocate for change. These creators provide knowledge and tools to navigate an increasingly diverse and complex world, enabling integration and a sense of belonging within society. At the same time, they challenge and mobilize against forces that oppose and perpetuate these grievances, and advocate for a more just and equitable society.

However, both chapters share a central limitation: a selection bias that warrants further research. Both studies focus primarily on prominent accounts with large followings and high view counts. The main argument for this focus is that these highly visible accounts serve as proxies for dominant narratives and content to which a large proportion of (Muslim) users are exposed. Their popularity may indicate a degree of alignment between their content and audience affinities. From a field theory perspective, these accounts could be seen as part of the dominating field of German Muslim TikTok, setting trends and

serving as reference points for others. However, as previously discussed, TikTok allows lesser-known and less followed accounts to create videos that can still achieve virality. The methodological approach of these studies does not account for these smaller accounts and their content, potentially introducing bias into the selection of videos that users are assumed to watch. The content produced by popular accounts, content that contributes to their sustained visibility and followers, may differ significantly from that of creators who do not accumulate large audiences but occasionally achieve viral success. These differences could be thematic, creative, or substantive, meaning that this selection bias could lead to an incomplete representation of the variety of content consumed by users.

There is also a direct technical explanation for why this bias might exist. First, the algorithm may favor content from successful accounts, not particularly because of their large followings, but because they adhere to elements that are socioculturally more appealing to mainstream audiences. This raises the possibility that the selected accounts produce similar types of content and may not fully represent the broader content landscape, particularly fringe actors, including extremists. Second, TikTok actively moderates content. Explicit content, illegal activity, violence, and similar material may be moderated or removed before they gain significant visibility or reach a mainstream audience. One indicator supporting this claim is that Chapter 2 did not find any explicit incitement to violence in the data analyzed. This suggests that such content or accounts may be filtered out by the platform's moderation processes before they become widely visible. Further research is needed to investigate this issue, as two different arguments can be made.

Such accounts and their videos may exist, but the bias introduced by moderation may render them irrelevant to the general Muslim user base on TikTok, as they are rarely exposed to this content. Conversely, we know that videos are suggested on TikTok regardless of an account's popularity. Furthermore, each video starts out with low visibility before gaining traction and thus attention. By using coded language such as "algospeak"–a technique that avoids triggering automated moderation (see Klug et al., 2023; Oudray, 2023; Steen et al., 2023)–certain content can evade detection, spread to a wide audience, and have an impact before being removed. Reports and research suggest that this phenomenon exists, making it a pressing point for further study. Future research should focus on analyzing what TikTok users are actually exposed to and what content is algorithmically suggested to them, for example through user data donations. This approach would allow researchers to examine content from the consumer's perspective, rather than relying solely on creator analysis, trained consumer bots, or self-experimentation. This would require developing, improving, and refining existing models in the field, such as hate speech detection models, or fine-tuning large language models and optical character recognition (OCR) systems to effectively analyze the videos within the user data.

Research Question 3

While Research Questions 1 and 2 focused on the videos produced and shared on TikTok–examining their relationship to radicalism, representation, and related issues–Research Question 3 explored how these videos are consumed, perceived, and, more importantly, how their consumption affects sociopolitical views:

RQ 3 How does the consumption of this content affect the values and attitudes of German Muslim TikTok users? Does it promote radicalization and/or act as a preventive force?

The objective of Chapter 3 was to address this specific research question, with a specific focus on the role of perceived social exclusion, discrimination, and grievances as drivers of attitudinal change. This was achieved through a novel field experiment on TikTok involving 99 German Muslim TikTok users who were divided into three intervention groups. The study measured perceived discrimination and participants' willingness to engage in violent or illegal actions as a political response, referencing Moskalenko and McCauley (2009) for the operational definition. Two intervention groups followed designated TikTok accounts created and controlled by the research team. Each account uploaded a video daily for a 14-day intervention period, with one account sharing potentially radicalizing content (treatment group) and the other uploading positive, potentially preventative content (control group). The videos were derived from the findings presented in Chapters 1 and 2. Participants in these groups were instructed to use TikTok as they normally would. The third group, the survey group, watched the treatment group's videos in an online survey environment, viewing each video in its entirety.

Before and after the intervention, or video consumption for the survey group, participants completed surveys measuring their attitudes, opinions, and recall of the videos to assess differences between the groups. The rationale behind this approach was to conduct a field experiment in the natural environment of TikTok, capturing how the platform's algorithm and user engagement styles influence the potential for radicalization. This was then compared to a controlled survey environment where videos were consumed as stand-alone content. Descriptive, multivariate, and contextual evidence was presented to answer this research question and to explore how TikTok's environment might shape the unfolding of radicalization processes.

In summary, the participants showed considerable resilience in their sociopolitical attitudes over the 14-day intervention period, taking into account the biases discussed in this chapter. In other words, their opinions showed little change before and after the interventions. Descriptive results showed that perceived discrimination was highest in scenarios where Muslims were perceived to be structurally discriminated against by society or the law in terms of access to resources, jobs, and institutions. Across all intervention groups, baseline agreement with these perceptions was high. In these two scenarios, slightly

more participants were willing to resort to violence than not, with a marginal difference between baseline and post-intervention responses. This change was most evident in the treatment group, where the discrepancy was more pronounced than in the survey and control groups.

Similarly, some changes were observed bivariate in attitudes toward different forms of government. While overall support for democracy remained strong before and after the intervention, there were some minor changes in attitudes toward technocratic or authoritarian government, though not toward religious but non-democratic legal systems. The multivariate regression analysis found no statistically significant or meaningful changes in effect sizes between intervention groups when measuring agreement with scenarios or willingness to engage in illegal actions or violence. A small, statistically insignificant difference was observed for scenarios related to willingness to engage in violence, where the treatment group showed a slight increase compared to the other groups. This was primarily due to a slightly higher number of participants in the treatment group agreeing with such political means after treatment compared to the other groups, as reflected in the descriptive findings. In addition, both higher religiosity and older age were associated with a lower likelihood of changing attitudes toward illegal acts and violence, consistent with findings from previous studies.

Interestingly, and pointing back to the potential positive influence of TikTok, the control group showed less overall change in attitudes than the other groups, though not drastically. More specifically, while this group showed the highest rates of perceived discrimination after the intervention–which in theory suggests that it may serve as a cognitive or affective gateway to radicalization–minimal changes were observed. In some cases, such as willingness to use violence, there were no shifts toward increased violence; if anything, there were slight changes toward decreased willingness to use violence. This finding opens up an important avenue for future research. First, it suggests the need to further investigate the potentially positive effects of TikTok use on sociopolitical attitudes. Second, it highlights opportunities to explore how these positive effects can be encouraged and supported from both a policy and practitioner perspective.

In my opinion, the most novel, unprecedented, and perhaps counterintuitive insight generated by this research lies in the contextual evidence: how consumers interacted with content and how their methods of consumption contextualize potential radicalization on TikTok. This evidence highlights how radicalization on TikTok is influenced by various contextual factors, and offers a deeper understanding of how TikTok consumption works and its implications for radicalization, or lack thereof. I identified six videos in the experiment, in the treatment and survey groups specifically, that focused on anti-Muslim grievances. These videos offered systemic critiques of politics and the media in Germany, identifying these institutions as central culprits. In addition, some videos proposed political prescriptions to address these grievances. For example, one video proposed replacing existing governments with an Islamic state, which this particular actor

envisioned as a caliphate shaped according to their own narrow interpretation, as detailed in other videos by this actor, and presented as a response to the grievances of Muslims internationally. Again, this content closely mirrors Kruglanski's three elements of radical group ideology adoption: grievance, culprit, and method.

The interaction with these videos revealed important insights into why TikTok's consumption culture and algorithms play a critical role and should be given more consideration in the literature on radicalization, especially online. This is of particular importance given the widespread fear of TikTok as a potential vehicle for radicalization. First, most participants claimed not to have seen the videos or, if they had, rarely watched them in full or remembered their content. Of those who did remember the videos, only a fraction agreed with the messages. In comparison, the survey group–where participants were required to watch the videos in their entirety–had higher rates of agreement, likely because they were exposed to the full context of the content. This highlights how the practice of swiping and skipping through videos moderates whether the content is actually engaged with. A viewer's interest in a particular video is a critical factor in whether they stop and watch it. In this context, the actual attractiveness of a video–its ability to capture attention and make viewers pause–plays an important role. In addition, memory may also influence these results. It is possible that repeated exposure to such videos over time could have an effect, even if participants do not remember specific videos. However, this potential effect could be mitigated by concurrent exposure to inherently positive and preventative videos that serve as a counterbalance to radicalizing content.

Second, the practice of watching and interacting with these videos–largely overlooked in the existing literature–further contextualizes whether and how the consumption of radical content on TikTok leads to radicalization. For example, one participant in the treatment group liked all of the treatment videos, saved some, and even tried to share one. However, when answering recall questions on a specific video she liked and saved, she stated that she was not persuaded by the content, but rather shocked by the grievances portrayed. Notably, this same participant showed less radical views on almost all measures after the intervention. This suggests that a "like" is not necessarily an endorsement, but can carry specific cultural meanings depending on how users engage with the content. In this case, the participant used the like function to acknowledge the grievances presented–grievances relevant to her identity–rather than to signal full agreement with the video's message. This challenges common assumptions about the meaning of likes and their association with endorsement. This interpretation is further supported by the fact that most participants reported not watching the videos in full or skipping them. TikTok engagement metrics obtained through the management of the research accounts also support this behavior. On average, videos were watched for only a few seconds to just over 20 seconds. Given that many of these videos are longer, some lasting several minutes, and that policy prescriptions and methods are often presented at the very end of the video, it is likely that most participants did not see the closing messages unless they were interested

enough to watch the entire video. Even then, other contextual factors, such as individual risk predispositions, may need to come into play for the message to be accepted.

In addition, TikTok hosts an overwhelming amount of videos, most of which, given the nature of the platform, are related to entertainment and mundane topics. In collecting user data, I observed that many participants watched hundreds of videos per day. The same participant mentioned earlier watched an average of 132 videos per day and around 1,000 videos during the 14-day intervention period. Similarly, another participant who showed little to no change watched an average of 465 videos per day. Both participants described themselves as religious and actively participated in religious events - factors that are typically considered protective against radicalization. Their extensive video consumption raises important questions about the salience of radical content within such a vast stream of media, and how much exposure would be necessary for radical messages to take hold. These contextual findings are highly relevant and serve as a precedent for future research to explore and incorporate when studying online radicalization.

Similarly, I argue that the limitations of this study should be seen as a foundation for future research - seminal work that allows for further exploration of digital harms, safety, and representation. Given the heterogeneous results in Chapter 3, it is highly likely that unobserved heterogeneity influenced the multivariate analysis. To some extent, this is to be expected. Realistically, the number of potential risk factors is so extensive that accounting for all of them would require highly complex models and may require entirely different methodological approaches.

To illustrate, consider the example of experiences with violence or grievances. It is highly plausible that differences in attitude change are shaped by prior exposure to such experiences. Moreover, the dynamics of these experiences, particularly their severity and potential trauma and their occurrence during the intervention period itself, may have influenced outcomes for some participants. While the discrimination variable provides a limited measure of this, it does not fully capture these nuances and may require more specialized psychological assessments. A more comprehensive approach might include regular psychological assessments of participants throughout the study, beyond a simple pre- and post-intervention survey. This may even require qualitative methods such as interviews or biographical reconstructions conducted by respective experts. More broadly, the many contextual factors that contribute to vulnerability, heightened political awareness, and political activism during an intervention need to be further addressed.

For example, the war in Gaza was ongoing during the study period. Many Muslims and pro-Palestinian activists in Germany not only witnessed the injustices faced by their Muslim brothers and sisters in Gaza but may have also experienced a heightened sense of injustice and marginalization within the German context from the resulting discourse. Looking at the occasionally higher number of participants who agreed that Muslims were marginalized after the intervention, this may not necessarily have been a direct result of the intervention itself but may have been influenced by other parallel events, such as the

war in the Middle East. It could be a function of a broader discourse that has been and continues to be, perceived as restrictive and negatively sanctioning those who express solidarity with the Gazans.

Therefore, in the interest of cumulative research progress, this study not only opens up but also necessitates further research commitment. This also applies to other limitations of the study, particularly the time frame and the number of accounts and videos manipulated, both of which should be expanded in future research. In particular, increasing the number of participants is critical to increasing statistical power. From a strictly mathematical standpoint, a larger N naturally leads to greater efficiency in effect sizes, as the standard error of beta coefficients decreases with a larger sample size.

Of course, the study in Chapter 3 was limited by resources; otherwise, a larger pool of participants would have been desirable. Nevertheless, future studies must maximize the N, especially from an exploratory rather than a mathematical standpoint. The less we know about a research topic and population, and given that radicalization is by definition a deviation from societal norms and thus a fringe phenomenon, larger sample sizes allow for finding enough cases of this rare phenomenon to make efficient estimates. I also argue that we still need to learn more about the potential causes of online radicalization; in trying to identify these various causes, a larger number of cases would allow us to increase our opportunity to find something new. As King et al. (1994, p. 214) put it: "since more noise in the system makes it harder to find a clear signal with a fixed number of observations. Collecting data on more units can increase our leverage enough for us to find systematic causal patterns". In addition, the heterogeneity of TikTok use, the interplay of positive and negative content, and pre-existing exposure to certain types of content–factors that should be controlled for–need further exploration. I am currently engaged in such work, attempting to identify and analyze the substance and extent of various exposure patterns in participants' user data. Ultimately, this can only be accomplished through computational methods that allow for large-scale analysis of potentially millions of videos.

A fundamental challenge, what I would call the "fundamental problem of measuring radicalization," in analogy to the "fundamental problem of causal inference," (Holland, 1986, p. 947) is the problem of social desirability bias. When asked about potentially illegal or violent actions, respondents may not answer truthfully, making surveys an imperfect tool for capturing actual behavior (see Hendriks et al., 1992). Other methods are better suited to mitigate this problem, at least in part. For example, reconstructing radicalization trajectories through qualitative interviews, for example, with (formerly) radicalized individuals, provides deeper insights (e.g. Baugut and Neumann, 2020). In addition, I argue that digital ethnography, which involves observing radical and non-radical actors in their deliberate online propaganda efforts and content production, offers a way to analyze extremist self-representation and recruitment strategies, an approach already used in Chapters 1 and 2.

In summary, the answer to the question "Does [TikTok] promote radicalization

and/or act as a preventive force" based on this study must be: mostly not, for some potentially, and it depends on their background, how they use TikTok, what they consume, and ultimately this needs further research.

General Discussion and Outlook

Radicalization remains a highly relevant and debated phenomenon, particularly with the rise of new technologies and the diffusion of extremist actors on social media, bringing new dynamics to the issue. However, in continuity with previous decades, security debates around online radicalization continue to focus disproportionately on Muslims, particularly in the West. This often involves the construction of Muslims as a source of insecurity, a framing that is intertwined with migration discourses (see General Introduction). Given the historical trajectory of migration that has led to the presence of Muslim communities in Europe, issues such as anti-Semitism, terrorism, violence, and crime are often framed as "imported" problems (e.g. Boie, 2025; Müller, 2021; Schlicht, 2024; von Altenbockum, 2023). This rhetoric is amplified when acts of violence are perpetrated by individuals from Muslim-majority countries, reinforcing voices that advocate more or more consequent deportation as an alleged solution (e.g. Tagesschau, 2025).

In this context, rigorous, critical, and innovative research is more important than ever. Scholarship plays a critical role in demystifying supposed "common sense" and narratives propagated by ill-intentioned or malicious actors, distinguishing facts from misinformation, and ultimately helping to secure both the Internet and society by identifying both vulnerabilities and opportunities. The dynamic and fast-paced nature of the Internet makes it difficult to keep up with these developments, but doing so is imperative-especially in the area of radicalization, even if it may not be fully achievable. As a society, we need to understand these evolving dynamics to develop appropriate and context-specific solutions when challenges arise. This requires research that not only adapts but also innovates in both scope and methodology, adapting to the realities of the digital sphere and social media ecosystems.

This dissertation has attempted to do just that, employing novel and innovative methodologies while keeping its substantive focus on TikTok as a relatively new phenomenon. It has examined the content production of Muslim creators, identified the role of social grievances, and explored their potential risks and benefits. Through a TikTok field experiment, the study also sought to understand how such content might influence radicalization processes and what contextual factors shape these effects. The findings suggest an overall resilience, with some observed positive and negative changes, changes that warrant further long-term analysis and large-scale research. Based on these findings, I offer several imperatives for future research on digital representation and radicalization, particularly as it relates to Muslims in the West.

As noted above, the digital space is constantly evolving due to its speed and dynamism, and its role in shaping society remains significant. The digital sphere is not just a source of data for analysis, it should be the subject of investigation itself. The phenomena observed online are not confined to the Internet; they have tangible, real-world consequences. In light of this, researchers must critically reflect on how to *adapt existing methods and develop new approaches* that take into account the mechanics, structures, and sociocultural dimensions of digital platforms. This is especially important in understudied areas, such as the intersection of Muslim TikTok in Germany, radicalization, and empowerment.

When knowledge is limited, as it currently is in this very field, *descriptive and exploratory research* becomes even more critical, serving both empirical and theoretical functions. Exploring and systematizing the dynamics of TikTok for social, political, and religious representation is essential for informing future studies, advancing theoretical frameworks, and refining methodological approaches. Therefore, I argue that *more qualitative research* is needed to deepen our understanding of these issues. Qualitative research not only enhances our understanding of these dynamics, but also allows us to identify the meaning, purpose, and intentionality of actors in relation to TikTok consumption where we have limited deductive assumptions. As this study has shown, engagement with content on platforms like TikTok follows particular sociocultural practices, where liking and interacting have specific meanings and, I suspect, become more individualized over time.

This qualitative foundation, in turn, can enrich and support causal or falsification research that seeks to *empirically assess and actually measure whether TikTok consumption fosters radicalization or not*. By first describing and theorizing these patterns, we can then develop robust theoretical frameworks and methods to test and measure their actual implications. In this way, research can move beyond speculation and contribute to a more nuanced, evidence-based understanding of radicalization in the digital age.

One avenue where methods need to be further adapted and developed for this topic–one that has been extensively explored in many other areas of research–is the *study of digital data*. The nature of data observed in digital spaces differs significantly from traditional sources such as surveys. The literature on digital methods discusses this extensively, but the most fundamental difference is the sheer volume and complexity of text, speech, and visual elements that can be transcribed and analyzed. Given the vast number of actors present on social media and TikTok's particular way of incentivizing smaller accounts to produce content–through technical features that simplify content creation and an algorithm that does not strictly favor high follower counts–content creation has become highly decentralized and, to some extent, democratized. As a result, researchers must contend with an enormous number of accounts and an even larger volume of videos. To explore this further, *computational methods are essential, including computational text analysis* and the critical use of Large Language Models (LLMs).

As noted above, understanding the meaning users attach to their actions and consumption on TikTok and other platforms is critical to holistically assessing issues such as radicalization. More specifically, *taking the consumer perspective*, measuring the actual effects of content consumption or reconstructing the content suggested to TikTok users from a particular demographic, provides a more accurate picture than simply analyzing the videos produced. This can be done particularly well through *user data donations* that include users' viewing histories, allowing researchers to assess what content is actually being recommended and consumed, rather than inferring exposure solely from the production side. This distinction is critical because TikTok's algorithm serves as the link between content and consumers, meaning that what reaches an individual user may differ significantly from what is popular in general. These insights can then be included as variables in causal analyses, such as the experiment I conducted, to measure prior or alternative exposure to relevant content beyond the accounts that were part of the intervention.

With these imperatives, researchers can critically, rigorously, and effectively assess the potential for radicalization on social media platforms. This would allow us to *move beyond the moral panic surrounding the Internet*, driven by calls for bans and restrictions that often ignore the crucial role that digital spaces play for marginalized communities. Many individuals and groups rely on these platforms to create spaces and visibility for political advocacy and religious discourse that the broader society has yet to fully grant them. Given that major social media platforms will exist for the foreseeable future and that alternatives will continue to emerge, research must address this reality rather than fixate on hypothetical, distant regulatory changes. Practitioners cannot afford to wait for potential bans or regulations to be enacted; they need actionable insights as soon as possible. Research must, at the same time, navigate the space between naive "Big Tech optimism", which sees only opportunities and ignores potential harms, and excessive alarmism.

In this context, research on radicalization-whether online or offline-must be critical. As a socially significant issue that has shaped international and domestic policy for nearly three decades, studies of radicalization require rigorous conclusions and careful consideration of their implications. Researchers must remain aware of the implications of their work for security policy and the communities they study. In this context, this means *recognizing and challenging the securitization of Muslims* (see General Introduction). It is crucial to distinguish between real threats and unfounded, often racist accusations, between fact and opinion, and, most importantly, to understand the context in which research is conducted. Muslims, like everyone else, are entitled to hold politically conservative and religious views and, like every other religious community, derive their political aspirations and values from religious-moral foundations. As radicalization researchers, we need to be precise about what we construct as "objectionable" and under what conditions. Scholars must critically assess whether their own approaches contribute to this harmful framing of communities or actively work against harm and society at large.

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