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In Search of Emotional Comfort Zones: The Role of Exceptionality, Victimhood and Normality for Alternative Media Use

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ABSTRACT

Although interest in alternative media users has grown in recent years, research has focused mainly on why people abandon traditional news and turn to alternative sources. We still know relatively little about the epistemic reassurance, sense of recognition, emotional comfort, and understanding that users may find when engaging with these "other media." This study approaches alternative media as emotional comfort zones that offer validation and resonance amid broader conditions of epistemic instability. Drawing on a three-year qualitative longitudinal panel study ($n = 33$) of users and uses of alternative media, we identify three emotionally charged narratives – victimhood, exceptionality, and normality – that structure users' media repertoires and shape their interactions with alternative media content. These narratives provide affective orientation, enabling users to reaffirm identity positions through their media practices. In doing so, the study contributes to the emotional turn in media and journalism research by highlighting the affective infrastructures that underpin alternative media use within today's high-choice, hybrid media environment.

KEYWORDS

Alternative media; emotional comfort zones; longitudinal panel study; qualitative research; victimhood, exceptionality and normality; emotional turn

Introduction

In times of growing societal uncertainty and fragmented knowledge orders, the question of how individuals navigate an increasingly hybrid media environment (Chadwick 2013) has become ever more pressing. Contemporary societies are marked by what scholars have termed epistemic crises—fundamental disruptions of shared knowledge frameworks that traditionally structured public discourse (Bartsch et al. 2025; Hoggan-Kloubert and Hoggan 2023). As trust in established epistemic authorities such as journalism, politics and science gradually erodes (Andersen, Shehata, and Andersson 2023; Newman et al. 2025), individuals face fragmented informational landscapes, characterized by epistemic instability (Harambam 2020). This uncertainty

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can make orientation in an abundance of information increasingly difficult (Van Prooijen 2023).

Against this backdrop, alternative media have gained renewed prominence. Yet, what counts as "alternative" has long been historically and conceptually ambivalent. Earlier scholarship often emphasized alternative media as platforms for marginalized voices, progressive counter-publics, and emancipatory projects (Atton 2002; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). More recent research has highlighted the rise of a "new type of alternative media" (Müller and Schulz 2021) associated with anti-systemic, right-wing, conspiratorial, or populist orientations (Holt 2018; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Schwarzenegger 2021). In relational terms, the meaning of "alternative" only makes sense in relation to what is perceived as mainstream (Cammaerts 2026; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019).

Alternative media stem from a variety of backgrounds but share the promise to provide divergent views, contested interpretations of reality, and counter-voices to hegemonic mainstreams. Historically, many alternative media were closely tied to communities, movements, and activist formations, circulating mostly within and around them (Atton 2002; Holt et al. 2019; Schwarzenegger 2021). Alternative media were only later seen as a factor contributing to declining trust in traditional institutionalized media as epistemic authorities, but their users were rarely studied as audiences in their own right. More recently, Schwarzenegger (2021) argues, contemporary alternative media increasingly find audiences beyond the close-knit communities that produce them, making an audience-centered perspective particularly important. How users define and classify alternative media, and why these media become meaningful, therefore becomes a matter of empirical inquiry.

Starting from a radical audience-centered perspective (Swart et al. 2022), and informed by the emotional turn in journalism and communication research (Schöppl and Schwarzenegger 2025; Wahl-Jorgensen 2020), this study shifts attention from why people turn away from mainstream media to what they find in the alternative media spaces they turn to instead or additionally. Rather than imposing a narrow top-down definition, we examine how users themselves understand certain media as "alternatives" and why these media become meaningful to them. This bottom-up perspective reveals a heterogeneous field of use mirroring the broader genealogy of alternative media itself: from progressive and community-oriented projects to right-wing or conspiratorial offerings. We argue that alternative media function as emotional comfort zones for users seeking validation, resonance, and orientation in times of epistemic instability. Users may turn to them not only on rational or ideological grounds, but also because they offer spaces in which needs for certainty, belonging, and affective anchoring are negotiated and, at least temporarily, fulfilled (Schöppl and Schwarzenegger 2025).

Building on a three-year, qualitative, longitudinal panel study of 33 users of alternative media in Germany, this article investigates what users find in alternative media that makes these spaces meaningful to them. Starting from the proposition that emotional comfort is central to this process, it asks two specific questions:

RQ1: What forms of emotional comfort do users find in alternative media, and through which narratives do these media become emotionally meaningful?

RQ2: How do emotional comfort zones emerge, stabilize, shift, or erode across users' media repertoires over time?

These questions are addressed as part of a broader longitudinal research project on users and uses of alternative media. While the project as a whole examines alternative media use from several analytical angles, the present article focuses specifically on the affective and temporal dynamics through which alternative media become emotionally meaningful for users.

To answer these questions, we identify three emotionally charged narratives – victimhood, exceptionality, and normality – that structure users' media repertoires and interactions with alternative media. Despite important ideological differences, these narratives are central to how users seek emotional comfort and epistemic reassurance, while remaining unevenly distributed, differently articulated, and sometimes normatively opposed across cases. In this sense, the study shows that while alternative media become emotionally meaningful across a historically ambivalent field, the forms this emotional comfort takes are complex, context-sensitive, and changeable. In doing so, the article explores how users deliberately seek or incidentally find emotional comfort by negotiating victimhood, exceptionality, and normality.

Theoretical Framework

In contemporary communication research, alternative media have traditionally been examined for their position within the public sphere and their potential to foster counter-publics (Atton 2002; Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2008; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019). Early scholarship tended to idealize alternative media for their democratizing potential, closely linking them to progressive activism and social movements (Atton 2002). More recent research highlights a marked shift in this perspective. Today's alternative media are increasingly scrutinized for their entanglements with political extremism and their role in intensifying polarization. They are characterized by an anti-systemic orientation, often expressed through skepticism or even hostility toward perceived political, social, and media establishments (Holt 2018; Holt, Ustad Figenschou, and Frischlich 2019; Schwarzenegger 2021).

While this strand of research illuminates important political dynamics, the emotional dimensions of alternative media use remain comparatively underexplored. In journalism research, scholars have pointed to the limitations of rationalist models of media use and choice and called for an emotional turn in media and journalism studies as it becomes increasingly important to understand media engagement and information seeking and acquisition as embedded in affective and emotional processes (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). This also applies to alternative media, not least because users often do not classify information sources according to academic definitions (Bengtsson and Johansson 2024; Swart and Broersma 2024).

In line with this, research shows that news consumption and news navigation are not exclusively cognitive but rooted in emotional practices of everyday life (Bengtsson and Johansson 2024; Peeters and Maeseele 2026; Swart et al. 2022). Swart and Broersma (2024) thus call for a reorientation toward audiences' affective experiences

of news, urging scholars to examine "what feels like news" rather than what conforms to traditional news norms. This emotional orientation toward news also shapes how alternative media operate. They serve as both ideological arenas and affect generators (Lünenborg 2022), mobilizing emotions such as fear, anger and resentment (Abdel-Fadil 2023; Peeters and Maeseele 2026). Their affective pull is particularly strong around "trigger points" (Mau, Lux, and Westheuser 2023) – highly charged issues like migration, public health measures, or climate policy that invite intense identity negotiation.

This becomes particularly relevant in contexts of epistemic instability, where uncertainty about what is true and whom to trust can make emotional resonance more consequential for media choice (Harambam 2020; Peeters and Maeseele 2026). When epistemic certainty becomes difficult to attain, how information makes users feel and the resonance it provides may become an important resource for navigating the media environment (Swart and Broersma 2024; Wahl-Jorgensen 2020).This insight resonates with research on personalized media repertoires (Hasebrink and Hepp 2017), especially in a context where the boundaries of the alternative media concept have become increasingly blurred (Klawier, Prochazka, and Schweiger 2023; Steppat, Castro, and Esser 2023).

Although interest in alternative media users has grown in recent years, research has focused primarily on why people abandon traditional media and turn to alternatives, e.g., to find fresh perspectives and competing interpretations (Brems 2026; Schwarzenegger 2021, 2023). We still know relatively little about the epistemic reassurance, recognition, and emotional comfort users may find when engaging with these "other media." Some recurrent tropes, however, can already be identified in prior research. One of these tropes is a sense of victimization, the idea of being wronged by those in power, the ominous elites and the opaque cipher of "the system" (Holt 2018). Chouliaraki (2024) conceptualizes victimhood not as a fixed identity but as a "contingent and malleable speech act" that can be instrumentalized by a range of actors to gain moral and political legitimacy.

Alternative media can cater to that narrative and propel stories of ordinary people being wronged by those in power, thereby affirming collective marginalization (Mayer and Parks 2025; Roberts and Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). Furthermore, users of alternative media consider themselves as critical thinkers and exceptions to the presumed norm of easily manipulated news consumers. The use of alternative media outlets hence provides users with a sense of exceptionality, grounded in the belief that they possess privileged insight into what is "really" happening behind the scenes of "the system" (Schwarzenegger 2021, 2023).

Beyond victimization and exceptionality, motives for turning to contestable knowledge sources and alternative information may also include "breaches of normality." According to Mau, Lux, and Westheuser (2023) taxonomy of trigger points, this helps foreground how alternative media offer spaces in which users can (re-)establish a sense of normality, particularly in contexts where governmental regulations or sociocultural changes – such as climate neutrality or gender politics – are experienced as intrusive or "unbearable." In such cases, alternative media provide emotional comfort zones that validate users' grievances and potentially supply a community of like-minded individuals who share similar emotional responses. Alternative media

can thus reassure users that it is others – not themselves – who are violating norms and common sense.

In this sense, alternative media can be understood as emotionally resonant spaces that amplify narratives of victimhood, exceptionality, and normality. Our study builds on this framework by examining how these narratives unfold within users' long-term engagement with alternative media.

Research Design

To answer the research questions, this study draws on data from a qualitative long-term panel of 33 users of system-critical alternative media in Germany. The panel ran from 2022 to 2024 and comprised three waves of data collection. By adopting a longitudinal and audience-centered perspective (Edgerly and Vraga 2020), the study approaches users not as passive recipients of information, but as active meaning-makers whose media practices evolve over time.

Data Collection

The longitudinal panel study initially comprised 33 participants in the first wave, 32 in the second wave, and 27 in the third wave. Participants were between 20 and 52 years old; 19 identified as female and 14 as male. The median age of the sample was 26. In terms of professional and educational backgrounds, the panel was heterogeneous and included participants working in tourism, journalism, mechanics, science, IT, as well as students and full-time employees. Participants tended to have high levels of formal education.

The aim of the study was not to construct a statistically representative sample of "typical" alternative media users. This would have been difficult not only because of the heterogeneity of alternative media, but also because users' understandings of what counts as "alternative media" often diverge from academic definitions. Instead, the recruitment strategy sought to reflect a spectrum of ideologically diverse and system-critical positions within alternative media use. A central inclusion criterion was that participants regularly used one or more system-critical alternative media offerings as part of their broader media repertoire. This criterion was initially operationalized through a catalogue of media titles based on previous research on German-speaking alternative media and the project's own preparatory work. Nonetheless, as our sample shows, media repertoires also included English-language alternative media as well as other non-German-language media. At the same time, and in line with an audience-centered perspective, room was deliberately left for participants' own understandings of what counted as "alternative" or "mainstream" media in their everyday lives.

Recruitment combined several online and offline strategies, including outreach *via* digital platforms, postings in relevant online groups, and the distribution of flyers and posters in public spaces. Snowball sampling and referrals *via* third parties proved most effective. Given the resource-intensive and challenging recruitment process, and the skepticism of many alternative media users toward science, which they may perceive as representative of "the system", incentives were offered to encourage participation and compensate for time and effort invested (Hameleers and Van der Meer 2021).

Methodological Triangulation

To capture both documentary and reflexive dimensions of media use, the study employed a methodological triangulation design combining three qualitative methods in each wave: media diaries, media repertoire cards, and semi-structured interviews. This made it possible to reconstruct both routine media practices and participants' reflections on them within broader media repertoires (e.g., Hasebrink and Hepp 2017; Paus-Hasebrink, Kulterer, and Sinner 2019).

Before each interview, participants completed a one-week media diary documenting daily media usage, engagement triggers, and emotional responses. This format provided insight into everyday media use and moments of resonance, irritation, or emotional investment. Media repertoire cards visualized participants' broader media repertoires and enabled comparison across waves. The cards consisted of concentric circles: sources placed closer to the center were those participants considered more important in their everyday media use. Therefore, distance from the center did not indicate trust, ideological proximity, or whether a source was mainstream or alternative. Because the mapping exercise was conducted during the interview, participants explained their placements and discussed how they classified individual sources as alternative, mainstream, or otherwise meaningful. Semi-structured interviews formed the core of data collection, combining stable questions with the flexibility to address salient public developments and "trigger points" (Mau, Lux, and Westheuser 2023). The first wave took place in summer/autumn 2022, the second in summer 2023, and the third in summer/autumn 2024. All interviews were conducted *via* Zoom. In total, the dataset comprised 145 h of interview recordings (92 interviews), 92 media diaries, and 92 media repertoire cards.

Data Analysis and Case Selection

The dataset is part of a broader project on users and uses of alternative media and was analyzed using OpenQDA. Analysis followed a systematic strategy of qualitative content analysis that combined deductive and inductive coding (Mayring 2014) and unfolded iteratively across the three waves of data collection over three years.

In a first step, the material was structured deductively in relation to the study's theoretical framework and key sensitizing concepts, particularly alternative media use, media trust, epistemic orientations, and issue-specific trigger points. Building on this, a first cycle of coding identified recurring issues, media practices, emotionally charged moments, and patterns in how participants described and justified their media use across interviews, media diaries, and repertoire cards. Given the longitudinal design, the analysis also proceeded comparatively across cases and waves, making it possible to trace shifts in media repertoires, changing affective orientations, and moments in which alternative media gained or lost relevance over time.

Importantly, the three overarching narratives of victimhood, exceptionality, and normality were not imposed at the outset, but emerged gradually during the analysis. Victimhood and exceptionality materialized earlier, whereas normality only became more visible over time through repeated comparison across cases and waves. In this sense, the longitudinal design proved particularly valuable, as it allowed us to move

beyond participants' initially more rationalized accounts of media choice and to better reconstruct how emotional comfort, orientation, and justification became articulated over time. The three narratives thus reintegrate more granular case-specific coding into recurrent themes that were central to participants' navigation of epistemic uncertainty. They were not treated as rigid or mutually exclusive categories, but as heuristic dimensions continuously refined in engagement with the material. Ambivalent cases were considered analytically productive, as they helped sharpen the internal differentiation of the three narratives and revealed how they were negotiated differently across ideological positions and over time.

The presentation of the findings follows this analytical logic. Given the richness of the material, data presentation necessarily required selection. We therefore foreground selected longitudinal cases that make the three narratives analytically tangible while condensing broader patterns observed across the panel. These cases were chosen because they illustrate particularly clear, complex, or ambivalent constellations of victimhood, exceptionality, and normality and because they could be traced across several waves of data collection. Importantly, one case does not correspond to one isolated interview or data point. Rather, each case draws on multiple sources across up to three waves, including interviews, media diaries, and media repertoire cards. This allowed us to show not only what participants said at one moment in time, but how their media practices, orientations, and emotional attachments developed, stabilized, shifted, or eroded over time. We thus prioritized a smaller number of cases discussed in greater depth over a broader but more superficial presentation of all participants.

Ethical and Methodological Reflections

Researching users of system-critical alternative media required a careful balance between analytical distance and openness toward participants' perspectives. Transparent communication about the aims of the study and the handling of data was important throughout the panel process. No formal ethics approval was required for this type of interview study under German research regulations at the time of data collection; the study followed the ethical guidelines of the German Communication Association (DGPuK) and the DFG, which funded the project. All participants gave informed consent and participated voluntarily with the option to withdraw at any time; all data were anonymized during transcription and processed in accordance with the GDPR.

The longitudinal design proved important not only methodologically, but also interpersonally, as repeated contact helped sustain trust and panel retention over time. Building trust meant taking participants' views seriously and showing a genuine interest in how they interpreted media, politics, and their own positions, without aligning ourselves with these views. This required continuous reflexive attention to the researchers' own position, especially when dealing with politically sensitive and socially contested issues.

Findings: In Search of Emotional Comfort Zones

The analysis of how users integrate alternative media into their broader media repertoires reveals *emotional comfort* as a recurring and important element of alternative

media use. Against the backdrop of epistemic instability, users are guided not only by what information offers say, but also by how they make them feel. Alternative media thus serve not only as ideological refuges from mainstream narratives, but also as emotional shelters in which users feel seen, understood, and affirmed. From the users' perspective, alternative media become emotionally meaningful through differently articulated constellations of victimhood, exceptionality, and normality. More specifically, the three narratives were internally differentiated: victimhood ranged from self-referential to solidarity-based forms, normality from restorative to aspirational forms, and exceptionality from epistemic superiority to dialogic self-empowerment. These narratives help explain how users seek orientation, reassurance, and epistemic comfort in times of uncertainty without implying equivalence across ideological contexts.

We identify two primary pathways through which victimhood, exceptionality, and normality are negotiated in alternative media spaces: (1) deliberate affirmation and (2) incidental discovery. Notably, negotiations of victimhood, exceptionality, and normality in and through the use of alternative media rarely occurred in isolation. Instead, these dimensions overlapped and appeared in different constellations that shifted across issue contexts, personal trajectories, and waves. Ambivalent cases were analytically productive because they revealed particularly clearly how emotional comfort may involve both stabilization and destabilization over time.

Deliberate Negotiations of Victimhood, Exceptionality, and Normality in and via Alternative Media

A recurring pattern across cases and waves was that users of alternative media used these outlets to affirm and express their experiences of vicitmhood, exceptionality and normality. Deliberate engagement revealed how users across ideologically different positions turned to such media for emotional comfort, orientation, and reassurance while filling these narratives with different meanings, ranging from self-referential marginalization to solidarity-based or future-oriented negotiations. What unites these cases is not ideological equivalence, but the fact that alternative media became meaningful as spaces of confirmation, resonance, and epistemic reassurance in situations experienced as unsettling.

First, and in line with our interest in how participants initially turned to alternative media, we found that deliberate engagement was linked to experiences of exclusion, misrecognition, or dissatisfaction with dominant public discourses. Users described feeling wronged by "the system" or sensing that something was fundamentally off. The alternative media they encountered did not merely provide additional information, but addressed these perceptions directly and thereby offered a sense of recognition. For instance, Altin, a 39-year-old storeman and mechanic and avid consumer of YouTube, described alternative media in the first interview (summer 2022) as:

> […] Media that are viewed with suspicion […] by society at large, by the state, by the Office for the Protection of the Constitution, or by other media outlets. So, they are portrayed as conspiracy theorists, whether that is lawful or not is another story, but then there is, what I understand by alternative media, that some people hope or think they can

> turn to media that are simply not corrupt or, in other words, report independently. Not just for one side, but simply as it is.

When asked what had led him to this conclusion and to his broader suspicion toward "established media," Altin recounted an incident involving an acquaintance whom he described as having been misrepresented by "mainstream media" in the context of publicly distributing copies of the Qur'an. According to Altin's account, the media portrayal framed the incident in a misleading and stigmatizing way, ultimately harming not only the individual concerned but also Muslim communities more broadly and a wider public that, in his view, had been fooled by the media. Altin's account thus illustrates a self-referential and solidaristic negotiation of victimhood at once: while he did not present himself as the direct victim of the incident, he interpreted it as part of a broader pattern of misrecognition that also shaped his own media distrust and sense of marginalization. Altin thus recounted experiences of victimhood, which he attempted to address by turning increasingly to YouTube in the hope of encountering a more diverse range of perspectives.

The interplay between negotiating exceptionality and normality through alternative media was particularly evident in Altin's information practices regarding Russia's invasion of Ukraine. He criticized German news coverage for being overly pro-Western and pro-NATO and argued that responsibility for the conflict should not be attributed solely to Putin. At the same time, he repeatedly stressed that he does not consider himself a "Putin sympathizer." Rather, he positioned himself as part of a "large group" within German society that adopts a more differentiated view but feels systematically marginalized or silenced within established media discourses. Here, restorative normality becomes visible: alternative media reassured him that his own position remained legitimate, reasonable, and shared by a broader, if insufficiently recognized, collectivity. This restorative normality was intertwined with exceptionality, grounded in the belief that he was willing and able to look beyond one-sided dominant narratives.

In the second interview (summer 2023), Altin reiterated his perception that mainstream reporting lacks balance, again referring to coverage of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. YouTube continued to play a central role, with channels he perceived as authentic and independent.

> There are different YouTubers, and there are some who are kind of like me, just normal people who have created a YouTube channel and then report on things like what they think about them or why they think that way.

Among the channels Altin referred to explicitly was Actuarium, a YouTube channel that has been described by the Federal Office for the Protection of the Constitution (2014n.d.) as a mouthpiece for Shiite extremism, propagating Islamist, anti-Israel, and antisemitic narratives. Although Altin stated that he does not agree with all content disseminated by Actuarium, he highlighted its value and emphasized his ability to distinguish between what is right and wrong in the content. His case thus shows how self-referential and solidarity-based victimhood, restorative normality, and epistemic exceptionality can become intertwined in users' efforts to regain orientation and reassurance, even where selected sources appear problematic from an external perspective. Similar constellations of self-referential victimhood and restorative

normality were present across other participants in the panel, including Alexandra (22, jewelry designer), who saw herself as a victim due to her alternative views on Covid-19 and her heavy consumption of spiritual and esoteric media.

While Altin's engagement with alternative media was marked by efforts to counter perceived bias and to assert a differentiated position vis-à-vis dominant news narratives, Astrid similarly relied on alternative media in a deliberate manner, albeit with a markedly future-oriented and reformist focus. Astrid is a 24-year-old student training to become a teacher of German and Catholic religion. She deliberately engaged with alternative media to articulate and promote her views on religion, particularly with regard to what a future "new normality" in the Catholic Church should look like. In this context, Astrid advocated for a queer and LGBTQIA+ inclusive understanding of the Catholic community and actively drew on alternative religious media to do so. She primarily referred to Instagram influencers, podcasts, and livestreams, which she described as small, independent platforms that pursue specific goals and address niche topics and audiences. According to her, these outlets qualify as "alternative" because of their limited resources, their focus on underrepresented perspectives and their orientation toward specific communities. Her case thus resonates with the historical genealogy of alternative media as emancipatory, community-based, and progressive projects that create space for voices and identities marginalized in dominant settings. Throughout all three waves, Astrid consistently defined alternative media in these terms, while German public service media remained a central and trusted component of her media repertoire. Rather than rejecting mainstream outlets, she used alternative media to complement coverage of issues she perceived as insufficiently represented in established religious and news discourses.

The emotional comfort she derived from progressive religious media did not rest primarily on the reassurance that her present worldview was already widely recognized, but on the possibility of imagining and advancing a more inclusive future order. This deliberate combination strategy provided Astrid with emotional comfort and a sense of agency. By engaging with progressive religious media, she negotiated exceptionality less through claims of epistemic exceptionality than through a more dialogic and agentic form of self-empowerment. At the same time, her media practices were oriented toward the normalization of these perspectives: Astrid framed queer and LGBTQIA+ inclusion not as a fringe position, but as a necessary and desirable future development of Catholicism. Closely linked to her training as a teacher, her engagement was thus forward-looking and educational in nature, aimed at contributing to what she regarded as a more inclusive "new normality" within the Catholic Church. Astrid's case was not unique in this regard; other progressive participants such as Paula (24, student) or Marius (31, journalist) similarly drew on community-based alternative media to imagine forms of aspirational normality.

Another way in which participants deliberately used alternative media to (re-)gain emotional comfort can be seen in the case of Jacqueline. Jacqueline, a 35-year-old PhD candidate in the natural sciences and avid consumer of various right-wing alternative news platforms at the beginning of our longitudinal study (2022), expressed frustration over what she perceived as an enforced ideological conformity in

mainstream journalism. In the 2nd wave (summer 2023), she argued that discussions about sensitive topics, such as immigration, were censored or suppressed in traditional media, which, in her view, persisted in their "woke discourses":

> I think they are loud minorities. So I think it's both a loud minority when it comes to these Woke things, and a loud minority when it comes to this whole right-wing thing. And companies are just afraid. This shitstorm cancel culture thing is completely changing how we behave towards each other and how our media landscape behaves. Because as a company, you're probably afraid not to stick a rainbow somewhere during Pride Month.

Throughout all three waves, the ambivalent interplay of negotiating one's exceptionality and normality was present in the case of Jacqueline, as she criticized that 'mainstream media' try to impose an increasingly abnormal standard on society – especially when it comes to topics such as gender. At the same time, she found that alternative media dared to contradict this "imposed reality." For her, alternative media served not only as a counter-public where she could follow and articulate her concerns without fear of social repercussions, but also as a source of reassurance that 'normal perspectives' still exist beyond a left-wing, woke agenda. Her case illustrates restorative normality, as alternative media reassured her that her own views remained legitimate and insufficiently represented in mainstream discourse, while also supporting a sense of epistemic exceptionality. She emphasized the importance of being critical of alternative media content, acknowledging her own ability to reflect critically on it.

Emotional Comfort Zones, but Only for a While

The preceding cases illustrate how deliberately sought-out alternative media may provide emotional comfort, orientation, and reassurance. At the same time, the longitudinal perspective of our study shows that this function is contingent rather than stable. Fatigue emerged not as a fourth narrative, but as a temporal dynamic marking the limits of emotional comfort across ideologically different forms of alternative media use.

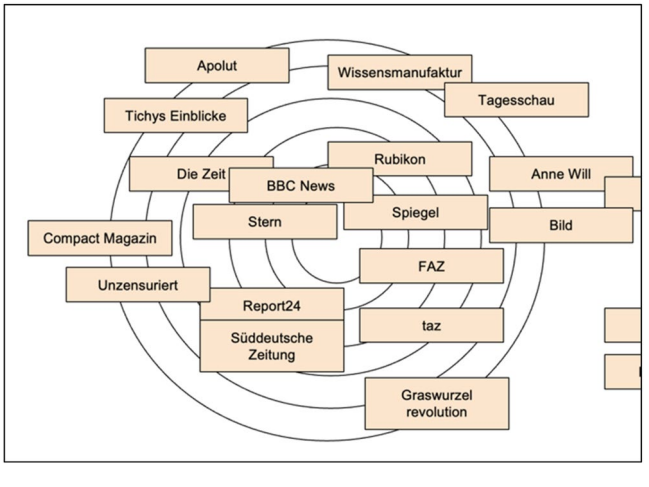

Figure 1. Media repertoire of Jacqueline, summer 2022.

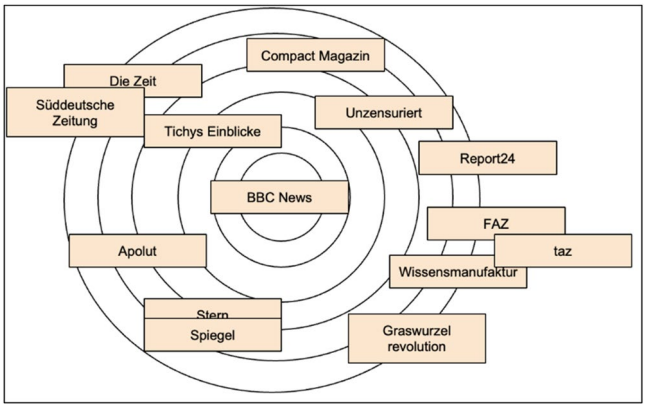

Figure 2. Media repertoire of Jacqueline, summer 2023.

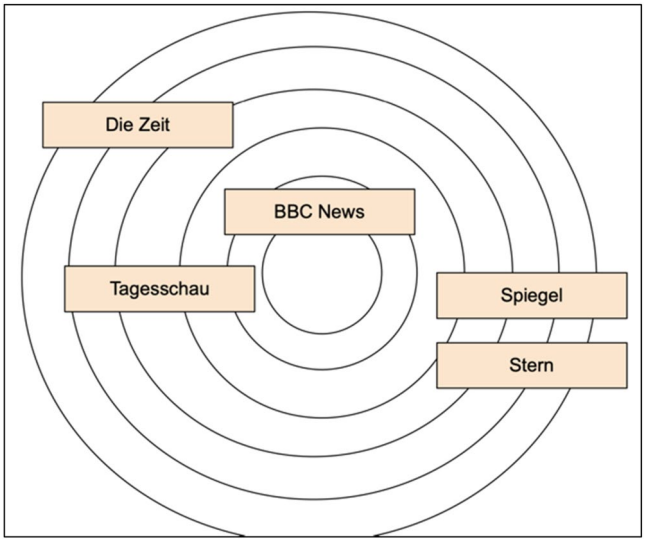

Figure 3. Media repertoire of Jacqueline, spring 2024.

Interestingly, Jacqueline's (35) media repertoire changed significantly over the course of the study. Initially, she combined heterogenous sources that she categorized as more or less mainstream or alternative (Figure 1). By the second wave, alternative media had become more relevant, with right-wing outlets becoming a central part of Jacqueline's media repertoire (Figure 2). However, already in the first interview she described an incipient media and news fatigue (Gurr and Metag 2021) leading to patterns of news avoidance (Ohme et al. 2023). By the third and final wave, her repertoire had narrowed substantially and consisted only of a few established German and British news outlets (Figure 3).

> But other than that, I've really tried to limit it as much as possible, because it's just not fun anymore. So, who voluntarily watches the news? It's just a complete disaster. (3rd wave/interview, spring 2024).

One possible explanation is that the pervasive negativity characteristic of right-wing alternative media – which frequently foregrounds negative emotions (Abdel-Fadil 2023; Peeters and Maeseele 2026) – contributed to her gradual disengagement. While we cannot reconstruct causality here, the longitudinal material suggests that once the emotional burden of repeated negativity and frustration began to outweigh the reassurance these media offered, their appeal diminished. Alternative media lost their appeal and appeared less as stable comfort zones than as temporary affective resources.

A similar dynamic can be observed in Maria's case, albeit with a different ideological orientation. Maria (24), a Political Science student, initially relied heavily on social media platforms, particularly Twitter/X, to follow and support progressive social movements, such as the climate activist movement Letzte Generation [Last Generation]. She used these platforms both to stay informed about ongoing developments and to express solidarity by liking, commenting on, and sharing content. When asked to define alternative media, Maria's understanding closely aligned with conceptualizations of alternative media as tools of emancipation for marginalized progressive groups (Bailey, Cammaerts, and Carpentier 2008).

However, by the second wave, approximately one year later (summer 2023), Maria exhibited pronounced signs of fatigue. This concerned not only her engagement in social movements but, more importantly, her overall information practices. She explicitly linked these changes to concerns about her mental well-being, which resulted in a substantial shift in her media repertoire. Whereas left-wing alternative outlets such as *Junge Welt* [Young World] or *Klasse Gegen Klasse* [Class Against Class] had played a pivotal role during the first wave (summer 2022), they were entirely absent in the second. Maria (summer 2023) explained this shift by emphasizing a renewed focus on personal development and a growing sense of resignation regarding political progress:

> But yes, otherwise, I hardly ever dealt with government policy and stuff like that, because I just thought it was just a different color, but ultimately they all do pretty much the same shit.

In Maria's case, alternative media initially provided emotional reassurance through aspirational normality, solidarity-based victimhood, and a collective activist orientation. As resignation and emotional exhaustion increased, however, these forms of reassurance lost their stabilizing force. Notably, this transformation again manifested primarily as a decline in the role of alternative media within Maria's media repertoire. Yet unlike in Jacqueline's case, this comfort did not rest on the reaffirmation of a missed legitimate present order, but on the possibility of imagining and emotionally inhabiting a different future order. As Maria's despair with politics increased, these emotionally charged negotiations became less salient. Consequently, alternative media lost their function as sources of emotional reassurance. The cases of Jacqueline and Maria show that alternative media may provide emotional comfort across ideologically different contexts, but that this comfort is conditional and temporary. Fatigue, overload, and disengagement therefore appear less as exceptions than as indicators of the temporal limits of emotionally sustaining (alternative) media use.

Incidental Discovery: Algorithmic Exposure and Gradual Identification in Negotiations of Victimhood, Exceptionality, and Normality in and via Alternative Media

In contrast to the deliberate engagement described above, other participants did not primarily seek out alternative media as clearly defined spaces of reassurance from the outset. Rather, they gradually found themselves drawn into alternative media environments through more incidental and at times only partly conscious processes, in which recommendations, socialization, issue-specific interest, and affective resonance played important roles. Incidental discovery thus does not describe a random pathway, but a mode in which alternative media become relevant over time because they resonate with pre-existing doubts, irritations, or desires for orientation.

Alexander, a 29-year-old software engineer, initially heavily consumed mainstream media but stumbled upon the No Agenda podcast, which he described as an 'awakening' experience.

> You just follow a podcast, so I don't look in my podcast app to see what's suggested for me or anything like that. […] Someone recommends NoAgenda, then I search for it and then NoAgenda is there and I have the new episodes and if I feel like it I listen to it or not. […] And um this podcast is so important to me because it got me out of my left-wing bubble that I was in when it came to news and information and my worldview and at some point I came across the Wake Up! (1st wave/interview, fall 2022)

Over time, Alexander's trust in traditional news outlets gradually eroded, and he began to rely more on alternative sources that, among other things, portrayed mainstream journalism as an extension of political elites. This shift was also visible in his media repertoire. Alternative sources such as influencers and right-wing YouTube

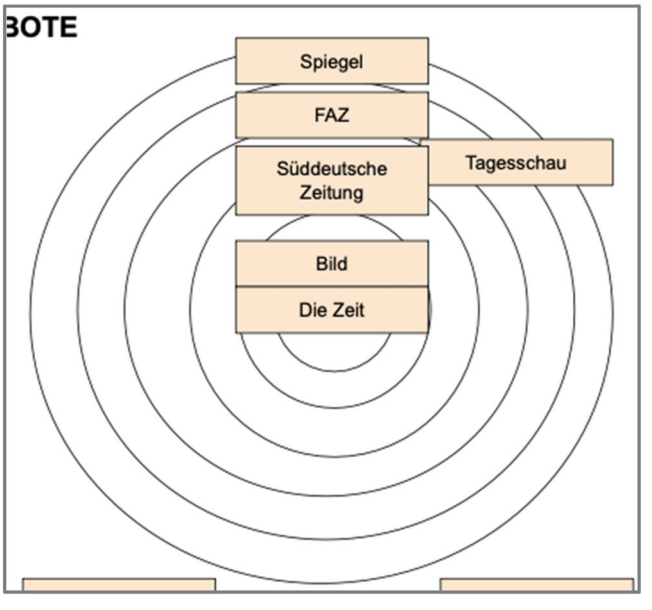

Figure 4. Media repertoire of Alexander, fall 2022.

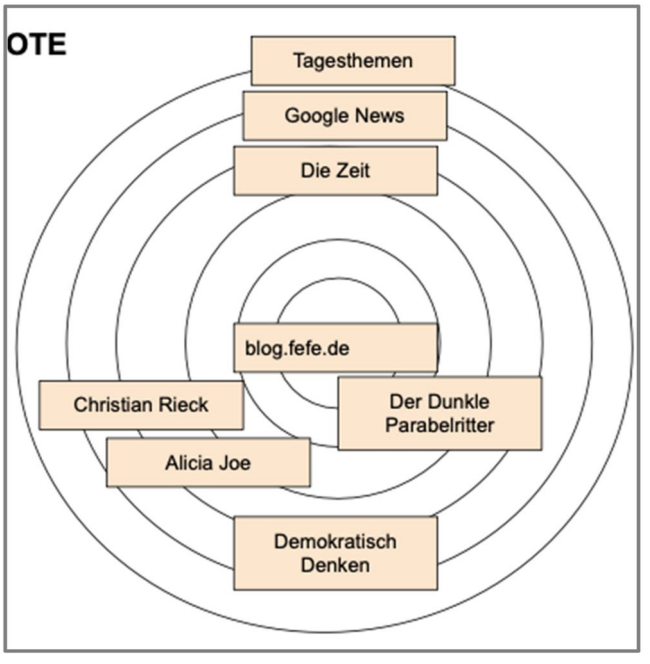

Figure 5. Media repertoire of Alexander, summer 2024.

channels (e.g., Demokratisch Denken) increasingly replaced traditional German news outlets (see Figures 4 and 5).

This shift was not just a cognitive reassessment, but an affective one. Alexander described how consuming alternative media made him feel 'liberated' from a perceived left-wing ideological bias, even concluding in the third wave of the study that the culture war – of left and right-wing ideological dominance – had been resolved in favor of right-wing political discourses:

> I consider this issue [culture war] to be resolved. Over the last few years, I've always seen it as a threat that really had to be taken seriously, coming from the left-wing spectrum. And now I can see that this side has lost. […]. And so the topic has become a little less interesting for me. (3rd wave/interview, summer 2024)

Alexander's case is particularly instructive because it highlights the ambivalent dynamics of incidental discovery. From his own perspective, the turn toward alternative media was initially experienced as stabilizing: these media provided recognition, interpretive coherence, and the feeling of finally being addressed after disappointment with what he perceived as a homogeneous mainstream environment. In this sense, incidental encounters with alternative media could become emotionally comforting not despite, but because of their capacity to frame diffuse dissatisfaction as intelligible and justified. At the same time, from an external analytical perspective, Alexander's growing immersion in right-wing alternative media can also be read as a process of affective narrowing and potential destabilization. His case therefore makes visible that emotional comfort is not necessarily synonymous with stability in any uncomplicated sense, but may emerge through ongoing movements of destabilization and re-stabilization.

Alexander thus constitutes an exemplary case of how users negotiate victimhood and exceptionality through alternative media use. More specifically, his trajectory shows how self-referential victimhood and epistemic exceptionality may become intertwined in incidental pathways. While he initially described feeling "trapped" by left-wing ideological agendas (victimhood), his shift toward alternative media was accompanied by feelings of enlightenment, empowerment, and epistemic superiority (exceptionality). Similar affective responses were observed among other participants who moved from mainstream to alternative media environments. In this sense, alternative media function as spaces of epistemic recalibration: they enable users to renegotiate their relationship to knowledge, trust, and epistemic authority (Bartsch et al. 2025), often in ways that position themselves as having gained interpretive and moral superiority.

Looking at the Other Side: Exploratory Use of Alternative Media and Epistemic Exceptionality

Incidental discovery, however, does not necessarily entail a search for affective identification or ideological alignment. For participants such as Amir or Markus, exposure remained exploratory and situational, serving informational and communicative purposes rather than fostering stable attachment. The use of alternative media to substantiate one's own opinions and to appear well-informed in discussions may also take the form of a counter-informational practice. Amir (26), a language student in our sample, described how he engages with alternative media to familiarize himself with perspectives he does not share. In particular, he referred to media outlets and social media accounts of political actors representing opposing political positions, which he follows to better understand "the other side."

A similar strategy was articulated by Markus (26), a consultant in Human Factors Engineering. During the first interview (summer 2022), Markus explained that he deliberately seeks out a wide range of political perspectives – especially in relation to highly contested issues such as migration. Given his own left-leaning political orientation, he reported paying particular attention to right-wing media outlets in order to better grasp the motivations and argumentative patterns underlying these positions:

> So, I can explain again how I do it: when there are major issues at stake, such as the war in Ukraine, the refugee crisis, or anything else, I try to look at a wide range of political perspectives, including very right-wing ones, simply because I feel that this better prepares me to engage in dialogue with people who may hold these views. […].

In this sense, engaging with alternative media may also function as a means of self-empowerment in political discussions. Beyond mere awareness of opposing viewpoints, participants such as Amir and Markus emphasized the importance of critically understanding and reflecting on these positions. Exceptionality emerged less from exclusive access to truth than from feeling particularly well prepared for debate. In these cases, emotional comfort stemmed less from recognition than from the confidence of feeling discursively prepared. By contrast, Alexander's case illustrates how initially exploratory and curiosity-driven engagement can take a different trajectory. What begins as curiosity, observation, or a search for nuance may, over time, become more affectively invested and more closely tied to processes of identification and reorientation.

Distancing and Affirmation: Ambivalent Negotiations of Normality and Exceptionality in Alternative Media Spheres

Whereas the previous subsection highlighted exploratory engagements with alternative media as resources for epistemic *exceptionality*, Otto's case reveals how such engagements can become internally ambivalent, combining strategic distancing from extreme positions with selective forms of affirmation. Similar to other participants, Otto, a 21-year-old student in humanities and social sciences, did not deliberately seek out alternative media in a systematic way. Rather, his exposure emerged gradually through recommendations on YouTube, for instance *via* content creators such as *Internet Historian*, which led him to platforms like the imageboard *4chan*.

Otto described 4chan as a highly heterogeneous environment, ranging from everyday discussions about hobbies or literature to highly radical and extremist content. While he clearly distanced himself from what he perceived as extreme, racist, or conspiratorial positions on the platform, he reported using *4cha*n regularly – primarily in an ironic and observational manner:

> 4chan is kind of an interesting case. It's basically an imageboard, somewhat comparable to a social network, divided into different sections. There's everything from culture and video games to DIY stuff and hobbies. […] There's also a political board, and I look at that every now and then. It's marked as Not Safe For Work, and things can get pretty intense there. […] If some people meant seriously what they write, then they would be very hardcore right-wing extremists. I'm sure some do mean it seriously. But I think a large part of it is about having fun and seeing how far black humor can be taken—which I personally find very funny. (1st wave/interview, summer 2022)

Otto emphasized that he perceived himself as clearly distinct from what he referred to as the "completely insane" users on the platform, thereby reaffirming his own sense of normality in contrast to these extreme others. At the same time, he described deriving entertainment from what he framed as the platform's "absurd cinema," for example when users invent exaggerated conspiracy theories as part of ironic in-group practices (2nd wave, summer 2023).

Otto's account is particularly revealing because it shows how ironic engagement may function as both a mode of distancing and a mode of continued attachment. In line with Phillips and Milner (2017) work on ambivalent humor, his references to "black humor" and the enjoyment of "absurd cinema" do not simply mark a clear boundary between complicity and critique. Rather, ironic distance may coexist with entertainment and selective normalization. This simultaneous distancing and engagement allowed Otto to position himself as a reflective observer – someone who understood himself as capable of navigating extreme content without fully adopting it. In this sense, normality and exceptionality were negotiated together: normality through differentiation from extremist others, and exceptionality through the self-ascription of reflexive distance and interpretive control.

Alongside this ironic and distanced engagement, Otto described a more affirmative relationship with right-leaning alternative media, particularly Tichys Einblick, which he categorized as a liberal-conservative outlet. Here, his engagement was less ironic and more explicitly normative, especially regarding values and societal change:

> I am convinced that traditional values still have their value, and that in some cases it might make sense to reflect on what already exists instead of compulsively trying to tear down old structures. (1st wave/interview, summer 2022)

This selective affirmation shows that Otto's engagement with alternative media did not remain purely observational. Rather, the ironic navigation of more extreme spaces coexisted with explicit agreement with more conservative positions that he regarded as insufficiently represented in mainstream discourse. On the one hand, his engagement with platforms such as 4chan involved a negotiation of normality through constant differentiation from extremist positions and actors. On the other hand, his selective affirmation of conservative alternative media enabled forms of exceptionality rooted in the endorsement of viewpoints he perceived as marginalized within mainstream discourse. Feelings of victimhood, meanwhile, remained implicitly co-negotiated, surfacing primarily through references to being prejudged for holding certain opinions. Otto's case thus highlights how incidental encounters with alternative media may oscillate between ironic distance, selective identification, and value-based affirmation.

Discussion and Conclusion

Following the emotional turn in journalism research (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020), this article has examined how alternative media use is embedded in affective sense-making practices. Rather than focusing only on why users turn away from mainstream media, we have asked what they find in alternative media and how these spaces become emotionally meaningful over time. The study offers three main conclusions.

Conclusion 1: Emotional Comfort is Narratively Structured

First, alternative media become emotionally meaningful through narratives of victimhood, exceptionality, and normality. While previous research has already highlighted victimhood and exceptionality as relevant tropes in alternative media environments, our findings foreground normality as a third narrative lens. Building on Mau, Lux, and Westheuser (2023) taxonomy, we show that alternative media do not merely help users identify perceived norm violations by political, academic, or media elites; they also offer different forms of normality. For some users in the sample, this takes the form of restorative normality, in which alternative media reassure them that their existing values and lifestyles remain legitimate. For others, especially progressive participants, alternative media support the imagination of an aspirational and more inclusive future normality. The analytical value of these narratives therefore lies not in treating them as fixed categories, but in showing how users seek emotional comfort and epistemic reassurance through differently articulated constellations.

Conclusion 2: Shared Narratives Do Not Imply Ideological Equivalence

Second, negotiations of victimhood, exceptionality, and normality rarely occur in isolation. They appear in dynamic constellations that shift across time, issue contexts, and ideological positions. What these constellations share is not ideological equivalence, but the fact that, from users' perspectives, they become meaningful pathways for coping with epistemic uncertainty. This is why an audience-centered perspective remains crucial: the same analytical narratives may be filled with very different, and at times normatively opposed, meanings. Future research should therefore examine more closely how similar

affective mechanisms operate across ideologically diverse alternative media environments without flattening the political and moral differences between them.

Conclusion 3: Emotional Comfort Zones Are Temporary and Fragile

Third, alternative media do not function as stable emotional comfort zones. Their capacity to provide comfort is contingent and often temporary. As seen in the cases of Jacqueline and Maria, emotional comfort may wane once negative implications, fatigue, or resignation outweigh affective reassurance. Users then disengage, often gradually and without explicit awareness, from the very alternative spaces that once provided them with orientation, recognition, or a sense of belonging. Emotional comfort, in this sense, is not a fixed outcome but a conditional by-product of ongoing negotiations of victimhood, exceptionality, and normality. The longitudinal design was particularly valuable because it showed not only how emotional comfort emerges, but also how it erodes, shifts, and gives way to overload or resignation across ideologically different forms of alternative media use.

Limitations and Future Research

Some limitations should be acknowledged. Although the sample is longitudinal and diverse in terms of media repertoires, it remains limited demographically and focuses primarily on users in Germany. Given the global rise of alternative media ecosystems (Newman et al. 2025), comparative cross-national research would be valuable for examining how emotional comfort zones are constructed in different political and cultural contexts. The study also relies on self-reported media practices and affective interpretations. While methodological triangulation helped contextualize these accounts, future research could combine qualitative longitudinal designs with observational or computational approaches to capture less explicit dimensions of emotional engagement. Finally, because the boundaries of "alternative media" remain fluid and contested, future studies should continue to examine how users themselves define this category and how these definitions change over time.

Taken together, these findings contribute to the growing body of work calling for an emotional turn in media and communication research (Wahl-Jorgensen 2020). Alternative media are not only ideological or epistemic projects; they are affective spaces in which users seek recognition, belonging, and orientation. Why certain narratives "feel true," and how alternative media shape what it means to feel informed, cannot be grasped without attending to this emotional dimension. Doing so is not an endorsement but a precondition for understanding why these media resonate as persistently as they do. It also explains why fact-checking and debunking alone cannot displace what is anchored not in evidence but in emotional plausibility.

Where alternative media use develops problematic implications for democratic coexistence and social cohesion, it is not sufficient simply to tell users that they are "wrong." Rather, it becomes crucial to understand where and how users are emotionally reached, which frustrations and disappointments make certain media offerings meaningful, and what forms of reassurance these media promise to provide. Only on this basis can we better identify where alternative media offer false promises, exploit

emotional insecurity, or transform diffuse dissatisfaction into politically consequential forms of certainty and resentment. A longitudinal perspective is important here, because it allows us to see not only how alternative media emotionally address users, but also where their reassuring force weakens and where possible moments of interruption, intervention, or change may emerge.

Author contributions

CRediT: **Katharina Schöppl**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft; **Christian Schwarzenegger**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – review & editing.

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