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See No Evil, Fear No Evil: Adolescents' Extremism-related Media Literacies of Islamist Propaganda on Instagram

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Abstract
Islamist extremists are a group that pose a particular threat not only due to their proneness to violence but also because they recruit transnationally, utilizing freely accessible social media platforms such as Instagram. One of their key target groups is adolescents, a group that is particularly vulnerable and in need for orientation due to a variety of life-stage-specific challenges. As a result, adolescents are particularly susceptible to external influences on platforms such as Instagram. Recognizing this, Islamist extremists focus their strategic communication on adolescents, using a variety of strategies for both their messaging and the format of their content on Instagram to make it appealing to this group. To protect adolescents, the importance of extremism-related (media) knowledge is emphasized. However, the transfer of knowledge to action is not without preconditions. This paper is based on semi-structured interviews with 12 adolescents in Germany and examines how they apply their knowledge on Islamist extremism when using Instagram and whether, and why, a break between knowledge and action occurs. The study reveals several individual, situational, and message factors that interfere with the process and deter adolescents from applying their knowledge and protecting themselves.

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Introduction

The radicalization of an individual is a long, multi-step process (Hafal, 2017) that has shifted to and occurred on the Internet in times of heightened attention from international security agencies. The United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC, 2022, p. 4) highlights that the threat of such (online) terrorist activities has increased and intensified since the beginning of 2020 as terrorist groups have "notably maximized their usage of social media platforms and other online tools to increase their reach and influence, and thus mobilize an unprecedented number of supporters." Accordingly, researchers emphasize the "extent and

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magnitude of threat related to online radicalization in the context of terrorist acts" (Binder & Kenyon, 2022, p. 1) that make it subject to international academic attention (see also Herath & Whittaker, 2021; Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017).

Social media, with its accessible technological interface, offers anonymity and a seemingly unlimited audience, providing an ideal environment for recruitment and radicalization by extremist groups. This has been particularly evident with Islamist extremists who conduct their violent interpretation of the concept of Jihad transnationally and recruit remotely (Lohlker et al., 2016; Pfahl-Traughber, 2018). During adolescence, between the ages of 15 and 17, youths have an increased need for orientation due to a variety of life-stage-specific challenges and are particularly vulnerable to external influences (Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2019). At the same time, this age group uses social media more frequently than any other user group. Instagram has become an everyday tool for adolescents' communication and is an integral part of their lives. This fact has been recognized by Islamist extremists, who focus their strategic communication on this target group on Instagram. There, among the bloggers, pop stars, and posts by friends, elements of Islamist propaganda are distributed and tailored to youth reception habits (Beyersdörfer et al., 2017).

This communication strategy means great danger for adolescents. Therefore, in the context of terrorism prevention with a focus on youth protection, the importance of teaching extremism-related (media) knowledge is emphasized (e.g., Hobbs, 2020). According to Schorb (2005), media literacy consists of three bundles of skills—knowledge, evaluation, and action—which are hierarchically arranged. Riesmeyer et al. (2016) further argue that knowledge is a necessary but not a sufficient prerequisite for media literacy. The transfer from knowledge to action is not without preconditions. Instead, previous studies have shown that adolescents can have problems implementing their knowledge in the actual reception situation on Instagram (Deutz-Schröder et al., 2012; Nienierza et al., 2019; Schmitt et al., 2019). As a result, the question arises as to whether there are previously unknown factors related to the message itself, the reception situation, or adolescents' individual traits that could negatively influence the transfer of knowledge to action (e.g., Jugl, 2022). Against this background, it can be assumed that adolescents, despite having existing knowledge, could be at the mercy of

influences from Islamist propaganda. In this case, previous measures to prevent radicalization would not be sufficient to protect them.

However, scientific findings on the activities of Islamist extremists on Instagram are lacking. Only a few studies have addressed the effects of extremist propaganda (e.g., Neumann, 2019) or the influence of the communicative strategies of Islamist extremists on adolescents. Moreover, there continues to be a gap in the literature on Instagram and the transfer of knowledge to action by adolescents (which in this case means whether they can recognize Islamist content on Instagram) and possible disruption factors preventing them from applying their knowledge and recognizing posts as Islamist. This paper addresses these desiderata. It is based on semi-structured interviews with 12 adolescents in Germany and examines how adolescents can apply their knowledge on Islamist extremism when on Instagram or whether, and why, a break occurs in the application of knowledge to action.

Theoretical Background

Global Threat of "Islamist Extremism"

Islamist extremism, although a form of religious-based extremism, is also a type of political extremism. It is based on the conviction that religion determines and regulates politics and society (Precht, 2007) and postulates the existence of a God-ordained, "true," and absolute order (German Federal Ministry of the Interior, Building, and Community, 2020). Islamism has been gaining international significance in recent years, largely due to its use of violence, which is promoted as a legitimate means to achieve its goals. In their violent interpretation of the concept of Jihad (holy war), Islamists fight against those of other faiths and non-believers as well as the Western world (Pfahl-Traughber, 2018). Difficult as a clear definition with a precise distinction between different sub-groups can be (Schmidt, 2021), scholars refer to the "Islamist spectrum" (Hummel & Riek, 2020, p. 88), which comprises several movements, including Jihadism, Salafism, jihadist Salafism, and many others. However distinct in their differences, in summary it can be stated that violent Islamism in all its variants is ultimately an ideology of inequality that promotes negative emotions against foreign groups and can encourage and legitimize the acceptance, advocacy, and practice of

violence (Reinemann et al., 2019). “The use of violence is justified by reference to a divine authority, an absolute truth, or a literal interpretation of texts deemed sacred” (Schmidt, 2021, p. 25).

Moreover, it is characterized by its rapidly growing numbers of followers (Yacobian & Stares, 2005), and consequently, the threat posed by Islamist radicalized individuals continues to be assessed as high (UNODC, 2022). The global threat posed by them is also due to the fact that they do not limit their fight against “enemies of Islam” to countries with a Muslim majority but conduct it also in Western countries, where they concentrate on “specific groups of people such as non-believers, pagans, apostates or heretics” (Schmidt, 2021, p. 24). Accordingly, Islamist extremism can be considered transnational in nature (Lohlker et al., 2016). For these processes of recruitment and radicalization, the Internet has opened a multitude of possibilities, especially with regard to reaching adolescents, the most important target group (Reinemann et al., 2019) for Islamist extremists. Jensen et al. (2018) identify an incremental role for social media, particularly in the radicalization of foreign fighters.

Adolescents as a Target Group of Islamist Extremists

Life-stage-specific characteristics can make adolescents more vulnerable to Islamist ideas than adults. Between the ages of approximately 15 and 17, adolescents are in the main phase of psychosocial development, and social reorientation takes place, during which the family loses its importance as the primary socialization agent (Steinberg & Morris, 2001). This destabilization combined with the challenging developmental tasks that adolescents face during this stage (e.g., identity formation) (Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018; Hurrelmann & Quenzel, 2019) create a natural vulnerability. For example, adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to influences from group ties and charismatic leaders (Hafal, 2017; Reinemann et al., 2019). Adolescence is also characterized by the search for orientation and a sense of purpose (Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018). Islamist ideologies can therefore be attractive to youth, offering strict rules, a clear distinction between good and evil, and clear goals (Glaser, 2016; Sinclair, 2010; Slootman & Tillie, 2006) as well as a strong group identity and a provocative contrast to the orthodoxies of the religious establishment (Institute for Strategic Dialogue [ISD], 2021a). In addition to life-stage-specific characteristics, socioeconomic, social, and

psychological factors may influence openness to extremist ideologies (e.g., social [structural] deprivation experiences, alienation, migration background, and discrimination experiences) (Jugl, 2022; Rieger et al., 2013). These factors are relevant regardless of age but can interplay with the experiences of adolescents and their life-stage-specific vulnerabilities.

Instagram as a Propaganda Platform for Islamist Extremists

After YouTube, Instagram is the second most popular social network in Germany. The "directed friendship model" (Baker & Walsh, 2018, p. 4559) allows users to follow accounts and gain followers without the need to follow back. While other platforms, such as Twitter, rely primarily on text-based messaging, Instagram is characterized by visual communication (Grieve, 2017; Riesmeyer et al., 2020). Users share real-time photos that showcase moments from their lives (Jeong & Lee, 2017) and can scroll through a seemingly infinite number of posts in their so-called "feed." Mixed in with posts from friends and followed accounts are posts curated by the algorithm, which are often not clearly labeled as such (Ludovico, 2018).

On one hand, adolescents use Instagram because they are looking for "social interaction with others, knowledge about others, documentation of everyday life, and the possibility of self-expression" (Riesmeyer et al., 2020, p. 20). Accordingly, Instagram can promote identity formation, the development of a sense of belonging, and creativity (Schurgin O'Keeffe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011; Swist et al., 2015). In Germany, the social network is particularly popular with girls and older adolescents: Among 18- to 19-year-olds, 83% are users of the social media platform. In the main phase of adolescence, from the ages of 15 to 17, the figure is slightly lower and varies between 70 and 82% (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest [mpfs], 2020; Vogels et al., 2022).

For Islamist extremists, on the other hand, Instagram represents the ideal environment for mobilizing, recruiting, and radicalizing members (Baines et al., 2006, 2010; Blaker, 2015); It serves as a "digital playing field," exacerbating division and atomization and amplifying even the most divisive messages and content (ISD, 2021b, p. 4). In this context, Winter (2015, p. 7) classifies social networks as "the decade's radical mosque," while in general the role of the Internet is recognized as that of a facilitator or catalyst (Meleagrou-Hitchens & Kaderbhai, 2017), especially for those that are regarded most vulnerable, such as adolescents (Binder &

Kenyon, 2022). As adolescents spend a lot of time using social media (Vogels et al., 2022), the risk of being exposed to radical views, opinions, and content in a supposedly safe space is high for this user group (DIVISI, 2016).

The advantages of Instagram lie in the platform's technical requirements: All activities on Instagram are resource-efficient and require minimal technical knowledge. Users can publish their own content anonymously, which poses a particular challenge for legal prosecution in the context of counter-terrorism (Reinemann et al., 2019). They can also reach other users around the world, such as by using hashtags, creating "viral" posts," and utilizing the Instagram algorithm (O'Callaghan et al., 2012). The Instagram algorithm poses a particular risk in this context as it prioritizes content from accounts with high numbers of followers and interactions and presents users with content that is classified as suitable for them based on their usage behavior (Kümpel & Rieger, 2020). In this way, users who do not consciously search for Islamist content can also be exposed to it, infinitely landing in echo chambers where singular opinions get reinforced by like-minded people, contributing to the radicalization of the individual (von Behr et al., 2013). All this allows members in Islamist groups to inform each other and to stay in contact but specially to find new potential recruits and to spread their ideology with the widest possible reach (Reinemann et al., 2019).

In recent years, Islamist extremists have been increasingly professionalizing their propaganda, targeting adolescents with their content and its design. Accordingly, the UNODC (2022, p. 3) refers to "frontier challenges" emanating from "gamification in recruitment efforts, an ecosystem of social media platforms and websites resilient to takedown operations, and narratives that use ambivalent and coded language to avoid being classified as unlawful speech." Moreover, using similar strategies as in marketing (e.g., by analyzing publicly available data such as group memberships, likes, and comments), Islamists can identify users who might be particularly vulnerable to their ideologies (UNODC, 2017). "They craft their strategies based on careful audience analysis and adapt their messages and delivery methods accordingly" (Bockstette, 2008, para. 2). McDonald (1999, p. 150) refers to these approaches as "foot-in-the-door techniques." The goal is "to arouse interest, to avoid an immediate rejection of the message, and to facilitate the search for further information about ideology-related topics or extremist actors" (Nienierza, 2019, p. 5). This corresponds to Berger's

radicalization model (2016, p. 13), which starts with "curiosity," followed by "consideration," and thus includes precisely the reactions that are intended to be evoked by the style of Islamist propaganda on Instagram. Moreover, some authors argue that online social networks can have the same or a similar influence on radicalization and mobilization as face-to-face interactions (Briggs, 2011; Conway, 2012; Pearson, 2016). This builds on arguments from authors in the field of media pedagogy who find that the specific modalities in social media increase the perceived social presence of communication (Baker & Walsh, 2018; Jeong & Lee, 2017).

Compared to other social media platforms that tend to be text-heavy, content on Instagram is usually more concise and visual (ISD, 2021b). Hence, the strategic adaptation of content to adolescents' everyday life occurs mostly *visually*, with "professional graphic design and typography" (ISD, 2021b, p. 10) being used or other modern presentation forms, such as memes (Kruglova, 2020). Moreover, using the aesthetic "Instagram Style," the human-despising ideology is presented to adolescents in a visually appealing way (jugendschutz.net, 2018). These forms of presentation are familiar to adolescents and are thus automatically "classified" mentally. The *adaptation of content* primarily involves utilizing familiar topics in adolescents' lives (e.g., soccer, music, fashion). This strategy guarantees adolescents' attention and leads to a positive evaluation of Islamist content, provided it is linked to positively evaluated adolescent topics.

Islamist extremists design content in such a way that allows their posts to spread as widely as possible unsuspiciously and with simple content statements to appeal to adolescents (Reinemann et al., 2019). These strategies offer bite-sized bits of ideology that are ideal for sharing purposes (Beyersdörfer et al., 2017) and resemble "wolf in sheep's clothing" strategies and concealment tactics. Through this process, at first glance, the presentation of extremist ideas does not reveal their underlying ideology (Glaser & Frankenberger, 2016). This happens not only visually but also in terms of content. For example, Islamist actors will hijack popular hashtags. To give an example, a term used in this context, as elaborated in detail in the latest report of the ISD (2021a, p. 18), is "Islamogram," a term increasingly being picked up by "a network of Salafis, Islamists and anyone in-between" since 2019. These "Islamogrammers" produce visually simple content that draws on online subcultures, popular memes, or video gaming platforms.

Extremism-related Media Literacies of Adolescents

Against this background, the question of how to support adolescents in dealing with and assessing such subtle Islamist content arises. Terrorism prevention programming focuses on teaching extremism-related media literacy (e.g., Jugl, 2022; Vissenberg et al., 2022). Nienierza et al. (2019, p. 5) defines this concept broadly as "competencies and expertise regarding extremism." This definition is based on Schorb's (2005) media literacy model and comprises knowledge, evaluation, and action (Livingstone, 2014). Extremism-related (media) knowledge consists of general extremism knowledge and extremism-related media knowledge (Nienierza et al., 2019). The former is defined as a combination of knowledge about religious extremism, Islamist actors and groups, and the threats of Islamism. The second is derived from the environment in which the activities of Islamist actors are studied. This includes knowledge about the communicative activities and strategies of Islamist actors on Instagram. Accordingly, many measures to prevent extremism or radicalization focus primarily on educating adolescents and awareness raising. This knowledge enables adolescents to identify Islamist content and to deal with it adequately. Only this way can adolescents have a certain degree of control over the potential media effects of Islamist content (Rieger et al., 2020). Against this background, "action" in this paper is defined as recognizing content on Instagram as Islamist and, as a result, putting the knowledge into practice.

To date, the academic research on terrorism has been critiqued for being "too event-driven and too strongly tied to governments' counterterrorism policies" (Schuurman, 2019, p. 463). Though there is emerging research, including large-scale quantitative studies focusing on the social media networks used by Islamist groups (e.g., Reinemann et al., 2019; ISD, 2021a), there is seldomly a focus on Instagram and even less on the extremism-related knowledge of adolescents even though terrorism prevention strategies often start with promoting education and awareness (Schmidt, 2021, p. 16). Therefore, we ask the following:

RQ1: How do adolescents apply their extremism-related media knowledge to identify Islamist content on Instagram?

Gap Between Knowledge and Action

The idea of a smooth and unconditional transition from knowledge to evaluation and action is not supported by all academics in the research field of media education. In this context, Riesmeyer et al. (2016) argues that knowledge is a necessary but not a sufficient prerequisite for media literacy. Despite a high level of knowledge, problems can arise if the transfer of knowledge does not occur properly. In the present literature, transfer is understood as the conversion of knowledge into action (in this case, to identify Islamist content on Instagram as such). This argument has been backed up in a study carried out by Martens (2010), who found that the high level of knowledge of adolescents did not automatically lead to critical media use or a change in behavior. There appears to be problems with the application of knowledge in concrete reception situations, which is also noted by Deutz-Schröder et al. (2012), who showed that adolescents could not transfer their extensive knowledge on the topic to recognize dictatorships. According to Nienierza et al. (2019), adolescents can have a high level of knowledge about extremist actors and their strategies on the Internet but cannot adequately apply it. Consequently, the question arises as to what factors can influence the transfer of knowledge to action (the identification of Islamist content). Although there is a lack of findings on extremism-related media knowledge and the transfer to action among adolescents specifically, in this paper, we derive three deductive categories of factors that interrupt the transfer process based on the previously presented state of the research and literature. In the following, these factors are referred to as "disruption factors":

(1) *Situational factors:* The reception situation is volatile; thereby Instagram is characterized by an endless supply of content. Consequently, not every post can be given the same amount of attention. There is often mention of automatic, almost mechanical scrolling through social media (Kohout, 2019). Furthermore, it can be assumed that adolescents' attentional resources are generally limited when using social media as they use it mainly for relaxation. This could negatively affect the application of knowledge and thus the transfer to action as knowledge is latent in reception situations and requires activation to exert its influence (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Possibly, the reception situation on Instagram does not allow this activation,

which blocks the transfer of knowledge. Furthermore, reception situations are fleeting, and sources can often not be recognized immediately, with messages being sometimes less than clear (Reinemann et al., 2019).

(2) *Message factors:* The strategic visual and content adaptation of Instagram posts by Islamists to adolescents' viewing habits can lead to a perceived familiarity among adolescents (Reinemann et al., 2019). This, in turn, may affect adolescents' ability to identify posts of an Islamist background. Thus, the question arises as to whether the content posted by Islamist actors on Instagram overrides adolescents' knowledge of extremism and extremism-related media knowledge and blocks the knowledge transfer in the reception situation due to adolescents' attention being influenced by representational features (hashtags, smileys, topic, language) (Schmitt et al., 2019). In previous studies, adolescents who have seen similar content to the presented extremist stimulus more frequently on the Internet rated the same significantly more positively (Reinemann et al., 2019). Consequently, it can be assumed that adolescents are led away from their original assessments. Reinemann et al. (2019) found a high degree of uncertainty among adolescents when assessing stimuli, which would be consistent with this consideration.

(3) *Individual factors*: On the individual level, motivation is a central category that determines whether and how a user transfers their knowledge into concrete actions (Pfadenhauer, 2010). Based on Deci and Ryan (2000), motivation can be understood as amotivation (a lack of any subjective meaning for the action), intrinsic motivation (engaged out of interest without thoughts as to consequences), and extrinsic motivation (motivated by external factors such as a fear of being punished or a struggle for recognition). In the study by Riesmeyer et al. (2016), it becomes clear that despite having knowledge, adolescents must also be (intrinsically) motivated to apply it. This is consistent with the findings by Nienierza et al. (2019), according to whom adolescents who had conversations about extremism at school, at home, or with friends—of which at least the conversations with friends can be interpreted as intrinsically motivated—identified extremist content more reliably and classified it correctly more often than adolescents without such motivated activities. Accordingly,

motivation could be relevant for the disruption between knowledge and action (Martens, 2010).

The research to date not only indicates that the transfer of knowledge to action is not without preconditions but also that there is a distinct lack of knowledge in the topic area presented. Therefore, we ask the following:

RQ2: How do situational, message, and individual factors influence the transfer of knowledge to action (identification)?

Method

Methodological Triangulation

To answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews were combined with a primary task (think-aloud element) and a quantitative follow-up questionnaire. This methodological triangulation is intended to ensure an intersubjectively comprehensible constructs' operationalization and a broadly holistic assessment of the phenomenon from different methodological perspectives (Flick, 2022). Furthermore, the think-aloud element was used to "gain situated and participant-generated knowledge" about Islamist extremism and the recognition of content on Instagram as Islamist (Koro-Ljungberg, 2013, p. 735; Leon & Morgan-Short, 2004).

The interview guide consisted of five blocks derived from the theoretical background (Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018; Nienierza 2019; Reinemann et al., 2019; Schorb, 2005), with the order of questions from these blocks varied to avoid possible priming effects. Table 1 gives an overview of the categories, their operationalization, and possible example questions.

Table 1: Overview Category System for Interview Guide

Category	Operationalization	Example questions
Everyday life & social media use (Riesmeyer et al., 2016)	• Used social media platforms and relevance • Usage frequency • Daily routines	• Which social media do you use? • If you had to choose which platform you like best, what would it be?
Extremism-related media literacy – evaluation (Nienierza et al., 2019, Reinemann et al., 2019)	• Open survey of content description and evaluation as positive, negative, or neutral for the target group	You may now look at a post on Instagram. • What do you see in the post? • What do you think of what you see?
Extremism-related media literacy – identification (Nienierza et al., 2019, Reinemann et al., 2019)	• Open survey of content identification stimulus as an Instagram post with an Islamist-motivated background (e.g., sender, message, and intention; Reinemann et al., 2019)	• Who could be the sender of the post?
Extremism-related media literacy – knowledge (Nienierza et al., 2019, Reinemann et al., 2019)	• Open survey of the definition of Islamism • Open survey of Islamist' communication strategies	• In the news, people often talk about "Islamism." If you had to explain to someone what this means, what would you say?

The adolescents were initially asked about their social media use (e.g., used social media platforms, frequency, daily routines, and followed accounts). This served both as an icebreaker and to get to know adolescents' usage habits. After the first block, the primary task was introduced. This think-aloud element was designed as an Instagram post with a subtle

Islamist-motivated background. It was based on a real Facebook post with its original features (image, subtitle, number of likes, etc.) adopted to Instagram through elements that reflect the strategies of Islamist extremists (e.g., hashtags, emojis; see Figure 1). In selecting the primary task, specific care was taken to ensure that it did not contain any elements that glorify violence or traumatize and instead contained a message close to the adolescents' everyday life (visual connection to "Nike"; adaption of "wolf in sheep's clothing" strategy).

Figure 1: Mock-up Instagram post of the Primary Task

Note: Own illustration based on Frankenberger et al. (2015)

After being shown Figure 1, participants were asked to describe what they see on the post and to evaluate the perceived content. The primary task assessed whether the adolescents were able to reflect (critically) on the content shown. The adolescents' reflections were free and uncontrolled; questions could be asked to stimulate them. Subsequently, the participants were asked the extent to which they recognized the content as Islamist and applied their existing knowledge about the communication strategies of Islamist actors and groups of actors. In this block, the adolescents' extremism-related media knowledge was assessed. This

took place after the completion of the primary task to avoid priming effects on the adolescents' ability to identify the Instagram post as Islamist-motivated. They were asked, for example, to define Islamism and to name strategies of Islamist extremists.

In total, the interview guide consisted of 24 questions, excluding the follow-up questions. To ensure that the interview was as comprehensive as possible and to rule out confounding, the adolescents were asked to give their assessment of various strategies in the follow-up questionnaire (e.g., likelihood assessment of Islamists engaging in public discussions on social media platforms, using images and memes popular with adolescents, or posting aesthetic images online). Thus, the adolescents' extremism-related media knowledge was surveyed both qualitatively through the interview guide and quantitatively in the follow-up questionnaire. This has been successfully applied previously in other studies (e.g., Reinemann et al., 2019; Riesmeyer et al., 2016).

The interview guide was pretested with two adolescents. The main goal was to ensure that the respondents are not influenced by the order of the questions in the guideline and to prevent confounding. Only minor changes were necessary, such as in the phrasing of questions to make them more easily understandable to the adolescents. This included adding a request that the adolescents not Google anything during the interview (such as the meaning of hashtags on the stimulus). Questions about the process and the order of the questions were clarified. The pretest was also used to train the interviewer, who is the first author of this paper.

Sample and Procedure

The sample consists of 12 adolescents from Bavaria, Germany (six girls and six boys). They use Instagram regularly and are between 15 and 17 years old. To map the transfer of knowledge to action, it was important to ensure that all the adolescents had a high level of extremism-related media knowledge. Since it was not possible to conduct detailed preliminary surveys, the level of knowledge was assessed in the interview and follow-up questionnaire; if it appeared that the adolescents' knowledge was not pronounced, the corresponding interviews were not utilized for the study. To ensure the comparability of the sample, attention was paid to the greatest possible homogeneity (see Table 2). The sample consists of

adolescents attending high school who do not have a migration background or have not experienced discrimination or deprivation.

Table 2: Overview of the Sample

Nr.	Pseudonym	Gender	Age
1	Lars	m	17
2	Franz	m	16
3	Oskar	m	17
4	Simon	m	15
5	Marc	m	15
6	Paul	m	16
7	Yanni	f	16
8	Lara	f	16
9	Olivia	f	16
10	Anna	f	17
11	Emily	f	15
12	Hanna	f	16

A snowball sampling approach was used in the Munich area. The recruitment was done in the first step through personal contacts with adults who established contacts with adolescents. These in turn were in the second step able to make friends aware of the study. Prerequisites for participation were belonging to the corresponding age group as well as having a formal higher educational background and the regular use of Instagram (for a critical evaluation of snowball sampling, see Noy, 2008) . In order not to influence the results of the study, only the parents were informed about the background of the study. The adolescents assumed it was a study focusing on adolescents' general media literacies on Instagram. Informed consent was signed by the parents and adolescents as all the subjects were underage. At the end of the interview, all participants were briefed on the purpose and topic of the study. In addition, the danger of strategic communication by Islamist extremists on Instagram was explained. All participants received a verbal and written debriefing and were able to ask

questions, and potential fears or concerns were addressed. The written debriefing included further information and advice points and was also sent to the parents with instructions regarding how to further discuss the topic if the adolescents should wish to do so.

Interviews were conducted in June 2021. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, they took place via the video platform ZOOM. They lasted between 30 and 40 minutes each. After an explanation of the process by the interviewer, the recording was started with permission from the adolescents. Through a shared screen, the primary task was shown. After the interview was completed, the follow-up questionnaire was sent to the adolescents. The interviews were subsequently transcribed and the audio files deleted. Since the adolescents were assured of anonymity at the beginning to promote free and unconstrained statements, all adolescents were assigned a pseudonym.[2]

Data Analysis

The analysis was carried out as category-guided using MAXQDA. To ensure an intersubjectively comprehensible evaluation of the interviews, deductive categories were first derived from the state of the research and theory (e.g., everyday life and media use routines, knowledge about extremism and extremism-related media knowledge, and evaluation) (Hurrelmann & Bauer, 2018; Nienierza 2019; Reinemann et al., 2019; Schorb, 2005). For RQ1, categories were established to track whether the adolescents identified the Instagram post as Islamist-motivated and how much guidance they needed from the interviewer in doing so. Three phases (unguided, partially guided, and guided) were distinguished. In this context, guided means that the adolescents were specifically asked whether they thought the post was Islamist-motivated. Inductively, individual expressions of the categories were added (e.g., the reference to algorithms, the deliberate ignoring of content from unknown senders).

For RQ2, three categories for situational, message, and individual factors were established based on the preliminary theoretical considerations (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Friestad & Wright, 1994; Kohout, 2019; Martens, 2010; Nienierza et al., 2019; Pfadenhauer, 2010; Reinemann et al., 2019; Schmitt et al., 2019). All interview statements that corresponded to these preliminary considerations were assigned. However, the subcategories of these three

[2] The study is part of the first author's master's thesis and is not externally funded.

main categories were mainly expanded inductively (e.g., lack of attention to the individual factors or automatic processing resulting from attributed familiarity with the message due to the similarity of the symbolism to "Nike"). The disruption factors were not manifestly assessed but rather latently evaluated during the interviews (e.g., measured by the direction of the adolescents' attention, their usage behavior, their motivation to identify Islamist-motivated content).

Results

Identification of Islamist Content on Instagram

The extent to which adolescents can transfer their extremism-related knowledge and identify Islamist content on Instagram was assessed using the think-aloud element. Speaking out loud, the adolescents allowed the interviewer to follow their thoughts when confronted with the Instagram post. If necessary, this process was stimulated by follow-up questions. Although all adolescents, as assessed by the survey, have a high level of extremism-related media knowledge, most of the adolescents (11 out of 12) could not identify the Instagram post as being Islamist-motivated without prompting by the interviewer. Thus, it seemed they were unable to transfer their knowledge to action. A gap between what they know and their ability to identify the post was especially evident in cases where adolescents were able to immediately identify the topic of the Instagram post but then failed to draw any consequential conclusions and downplayed the connection to Islamism: Lars (17) has "in relation to the Nike symbol [...] no idea what it is supposed to mean" and Paul (16) negates a connection to Islamism. Only Hanna (16) identified the Islamist motivation and justified her assessment: "The caption 'Let's do it' also sort of fits in with my theory that it's supposed to be propaganda or recruitment. [...] 'Let's do it,' that's a call for action and if you already have the suspicion that it could be something that people are being recruited for, and you see this call for action." Even with increasing prompting from the interviewer (e.g., "Who do you think could be the sender of this Instagram post?"), the number of those who identified the post increases only slightly (four out of 12). Franz (16) was skeptical about the sender: "I don't think it's a person from Nike, that would be pretty damaging to the company image. So,

either a person who is part of the Jihad or at least wants to try to get people excited about them." Three other adolescents were uncertain in their assessment. Marc (15) aptly identified that the hashtags "#justdoit and the #photooftheday are there for it to be suggested to more people [...] in order for a lot of people who aren't even looking for Jihad can come across it." However, he was not sure about the intention of the post. Just short of half of the adolescents could not identify and name the Islamist background of the sender. Paul (16) rated Islamism negatively but did not believe that the post was Islamist-motivated, "because an Islamist would not post something like that, he approaches this topic with a certain seriousness." Accordingly, to him, the sender seemed to be "a smaller wannabe meme site that wants to make fun of it and overall, also wants to get in the game with satire. (…) I don't think it's Islamist."

Even when asked specifically if the post could be Islamist-motivated, only seven out of the 12 correctly identify the sender. While Paul (16) had previously classified the post as harmless, he answered the question about the Islamist background of the post in the affirmative. Lara (16) and Emily (15), who both did not know the meaning of "Jihad," based their assessment on visual characteristics. The remaining adolescents were unsure about their assessment. Anna (17) did not know the term "Jihad": "I'm wondering the whole time what this 'Jihad' could mean," she said. What was particularly interesting was that Franz (16), who knew the word "Jihad" and had already identified the post as Islamist previously, changed his assessment when asked directly and was suddenly uncertain. It could be that the sender has an Islamist background, he says, but "of course it could be someone who is making a joke of it." Striking are the fluctuations to which the adolescents were subject during the interviews. This could have indicated uncertainties, which are also repeatedly expressed in the adolescents' phrasing ("That's probably not so good," Olivia, 16; "I'm not sure," Lars, 17). Such statements can be found in all the interviews. Even Hanna, who identified the post immediately as Islamist-motivated, said she was confused at first.

This observation is consistent with prior studies in which adolescents showed a considerable degree of uncertainty in identifying Islamist content online (Reinemann et al., 2019). Reinemann et al. (2019) primarily highlighted the importance of individual features, such as adolescents' knowledge and the frequency of their conversations about such topics in

their immediate environment. However, the results show that the problems in identification exist despite controlling for these individual features as all the adolescents in the present sample have strong extremism-related (media) knowledge.

Disruption Factors

The results show that there seems to be a gap between knowledge and action. The question therefore arises as to which factors influence this disruption.

(1) Situational Factors

According to their individual statements, slightly more than half (seven out of 12) of the adolescents do not consciously use Instagram. "It's always nice to switch off your brain and let yourself be entertained," says Lars (17). The adolescents use the platform primarily for relaxation and entertainment in addition to staying in touch with friends. "When I sit down in the evening and go on Instagram, I want to relax," says Paul (16). This picture painted by adolescents' statements about the reception situation on Instagram is predictable because entertainment takes up the largest share of reasons for use among adolescents (mpfs, 2020). Moreover, the mobile use of the app on a smartphone means that Instagram usage can take place in passing. Consequently, less attention resources are available. In a normal situation (outside the interview), Franz (16) highlighted that he would reflect on what he has seen on Instagram only after he had closed the app.

Another reason for less mindful and attentive behavior is that adolescents are confronted with an overabundance of content. "You're used to always seeing a relatively large number of posts. You don't go on Instagram, see one post, and leave again, but you see a lot, and that's why you don't always look at the posts so closely" (Oskar,17). Accordingly, the adolescents described not wanting to reflect on what they are seeing on Instagram: "I'm not on Instagram to look at every picture individually and analyze what I see exactly, what exactly is written underneath. But to just look at it briefly—to look at the next post—and to laugh" (Paul, 16). In this context, Kohout (2019) spoke of an automatic, almost mechanical scrolling through presented content. Accordingly, it seems reasonable to assume that the reception situation on Instagram negatively influences whether and how intensively the

adolescents can apply their extremism-related (media) knowledge. A lack of attention could prevent the knowledge from being activated at all. This knowledge is latently present in the reception situation but must be activated to exert its influence (Friestad & Wright, 1994). Yanni (16) summarized: "I think that the fast pace is a problem because people don't want to deal with things for so long. That's why I'm on TikTok more, for example, because the videos are faster. Instagram bores me."

In addition, it is to be expected that situational factors in the real reception situation have an even stronger limiting effect since most adolescents stated that they would probably not think so intensively about the post in that case. Accordingly, their evaluations would be different, tending toward viewing the post as more harmless. Since this is how the adolescents who reliably implemented their knowledge in the interview assess themselves, these tendencies are critical; after all, in the real reception situation, any support from third parties falls away, and the adolescents are left to their own devices.

(2) Message Factors

In line with the strategies of Islamist extremists on Instagram, the stimulus of the primary task was designed to include various aspects that relate to adolescents' everyday lives. These include the sports brand Nike, emojis, and well-known hashtags such as #photooftheday and #justdoit. The results show that these aspects are very familiar to the interviewed adolescents, as exemplified by Olivia's (16) statement: "Nike is super big, everyone knows it, and everyone has a piece of clothing from it." In addition to this commonality, however, differences between the adolescents also emerged: When first confronted with the Instagram post, the adolescents' unaided remarks either referred first to the content and then to the visual (four out of 12), first to the visual and then to the content (three out of 12), or only to the visual (five out of 12; see Table 3).

Table 3: Direction of Attention Through Visual Features

	First content	**First visual**	**Only visual**
Amount	4/12	3/12	5/12
Pseydonym	Franz Hanna Marc Oskar	Lars Paul Simon	Anna Emily Lara Olivia Yanni

Note: Message-related disruption factors: Adolescents' focus on content or visual

Judging by the adolescents' statements in the first confrontation on what the Instagram post was referring to, their attention is guided to varying degrees by the content and its visuals. Depending on the extent, the adolescents can apply their knowledge to varying degrees. This becomes clear when looking at the distribution of the adolescents within these groups: The adolescents who first pay attention to the content are also the ones who succeed in applying their extremism-related (media) knowledge when critically reflecting, evaluating, and identifying during the interviews. Their attention did not seem to be strongly occupied by the visuals. Alternatively, those who did not become suspicious despite having existing knowledge and who consequently needed stronger prompting from the interviewer first addressed the visual characteristics before the content of the Instagram post. This showed that the visual aspects claimed their attention initially and only then could they consider the Instagram post as a whole and address the topic. In contrast, the adolescents who also showed problems in applying their knowledge during the interviews referred exclusively to visual aspects. These interviewees either did not reflect critically at all or only when prompted to do so, and their evaluation criteria consisted primarily of aspects of presentation. "What I find beautiful about it or associate positively is this Nike trademark because I like wearing Nike clothes. I think that's why I had a bit of a more positive connotation with it at the beginning" (Anna, 17). For this group, visual aspects (e.g., Nike symbol, emojis, hashtags, image, colors) are the focus point. Judging from this, their attention was highly occupied by these aspects. This result is in line with the findings of Schmitt et al. (2019), who previously found that

adolescents find it difficult to apply their knowledge especially when attention is drawn by visual characteristics.

Furthermore, the perceived familiarity of visual aspects such as the brand may prevent the adolescents from applying their knowledge. This was particularly evident in the case of Olivia (16), who knew the term "Jihad" but did not verbalize this when describing her impression of the Instagram post. The familiarity of and focus on the visual aspects seemed to have prevented her knowledge from triggering an "initial suspicion." Furthermore, due to the bound attention and the perceived familiarity, some adolescents seemed to classify the Instagram post almost automatically as harmless.

The adolescents' statements made it clear that strong associations are linked to aspects of presentation: Emily (15) thought that the post had something to do with Nike, "because the hashtags say #justdoit and that has something to do with Nike." Emojis and hashtags sometimes evoked concrete associations: "The emoji with the sunglasses radiates summer for me, that's rather cheerful," Yanni (16) explained. The hashtag #photooftheday is also used "more among influencers who show the outfit of the day, harmless things," Yanni said. This seemingly distracts the adolescents from the negative context of the post. Thus, the initial positive evaluation on this basis carried over to the whole Instagram post. This can possibly be explained by the phenomenon of processing fluency (Reinemann et al., 2019).

The results allow an initial explanation for the observed uncertainty of the adolescents. The positive associations with familiar imaging and concepts triggered dissonance among the adolescents and confused or unsettled them. In these cases, what the adolescents know about Islamists (e.g., Jihad equals bad, war, aggression) contradicted what they additionally perceived (Nike equals popular; emoji with sunglasses equals cool, cheerful; hashtag #photooftheday equals nice picture of the day, harmless). Thus, this clarifies why Lars (17), Paul (16), and Simon (15), who had several times demonstrated their extensive knowledge did not draw consequential conclusions. The same applies to the adolescents who faltered during the interview and did not commit themselves even when specifically asked by the interviewer and remained unsure whether it was an Islamist-motivated sender.

(3) Individual Factors

Most adolescents (nine out of 12) expressed their intrinsic motivation to identify Islamist content on Instagram. Franz (16) said, "for me personally it is definitely important," because only if he could identify Islamist content right away could he act correctly. Emily (15) expressed that only then she would have a chance to "prevent negative consequences, to consciously decide against supporting that." Only when such content is identified consciously can adequate action take place, as, for example, Lara (16) said. Otherwise, "you risk falling into this trap and to be influenced." Intrinsic motivation was evident among the adolescents who have conversations about Islamist extremism among their friends and inform themselves about these topics on their own initiative. Amotivation could not be identified among the adolescents, but three adolescents could be classified between extrinsic and amotivation: "For me, it's probably less important because I don't respond to such posts much at all," said Anna (17), although she admitted that "of course it can happen to me." Marc (15) also saw the general need to be able to identify such content, "because many adolescents are not yet so sure of their opinions, and you can also influence adolescents more easily than adults," but he did not think he would change his mind "because of some post or something"; after all, he was "not so easily influenced." Accordingly, he believed that it is not very important for him to be able to identify such content. Table 4 shows the breakdown of the adolescents.

Table 4: Motivation of the Adolescents to Identify Islamist Content on Instagram

	Intrinsic motivation		**Extrinsic motivation**	**Amotivation**
Amount	9/12		3/12	3/12
Pseudonym	Emily	Olivia	Anna ◄- - - -►	Anna
	Franz	Oskar	Marc ◄- - - -►	Marc
	Hanna	Paul	Simon ◄- - - -►	Simon
	Lara	Yanni		
	Lars			

Note: Anna, Marc & Simon are more likely to be extrinsic rather than amotivated.

However, when exploring the question as to the extent to which motivation could be responsible for the disruption of extremism-related (media) knowledge and the corresponding evaluation and identification of Islamist-motivated content on Instagram, the distribution of motivation among the adolescents did not seem to be any more informative. Based on the theoretical groundwork, the group of adolescents who are intrinsically motivated to identify Islamist content on Instagram should correspond to those who have had fewer problems putting their extremism-related (media) knowledge into practice. However, this was not the case. Possibly, there is a connection with situational factors considering the fact that adolescents use Instagram primarily for relaxation and entertainment purposes. It is striking that it was the adolescents who cite these reasons for use who tended to have problems putting their knowledge into practice. Accordingly, they were not motivated to think much about the content they encounter.

Moreover, the adolescents themselves felt targeted by Islamist propaganda to varying degrees. When asked if he could imagine Islamists trying to target adolescents on Instagram, Paul (16), for example, answered, “myself rather less, but certainly adolescents are targeted.” Three out of the 12 were convinced that the regulations on Instagram protect them from Islamist content because “problematic” content is blocked (Lara, 16). Eight out of the 12 were confident of their own skills to identify such content. Some of the adolescents have different standards for themselves and others in evaluating the post as harmless or problematic. They assessed the effect on themselves as harmless and that only on younger, insecure people could the post “have a wrong influence” (Simon, 15). The fact that the adolescents do not feel affected by Islamist propaganda could have a negative impact on the transfer of knowledge to evaluation and identification. This could, for instance, result in either a lack of motivation to apply the knowledge, or reduce their attention or vigilance, as they greatly overestimate their own abilities or safety. The different standards applied by the adolescents in their evaluation of the content and their own risk may also reveal the so-called “third person effect” (TPE) (Banning, 2001; Perloff, 1999). This approach argues that most people reject the idea of the media having an effect on themselves. According to Golan and Lim, this may entail “behavioral consequences” (2016, p. 4682), the nature of which has not yet been further understood in the context of Islamist communication on Instagram.

Furthermore, the results demonstrate that a large proportion of the adolescents seemed to deliberately ignore the topic of "Islamism" or "extremism." For eight out of the 12 adolescents, Islamism is "a topic that comes up in the news, but you avoid it in everyday life" (Anna, 17). Avoidance behavior was evident at several points in the interviews, with one reason given as because "it makes our everyday life easier" Lars (17). "There are people who just don't deal with it because they don't want to, because maybe it's too stressful for them, because they say, 'Not my thing, I can't change anything anyway, why should I worry about it,'" explained Hanna (16), it is "easier to just not deal with it." Paul (16) summed it up this way: "I'm here for amusement, but not to think about what I consume." It seemed to be an unpleasant topic for the adolescents, and they did not want to deal with it. This can be linked to the research area of "deliberate ignorance." Deliberate ignorance is "the conscious choice not to seek or use knowledge" (Hertwig & Engel, 2020, p. 3). The reasons for this behavior can be manifold, but self-protection is most relevant to the present context. The interviewed adolescents may not want to deal with the issue because Islamism is related to war and violence. The fact that they are confronted with this on Instagram, where they occasionally provide intimate insights into their everyday lives, is possibly a reason for the adolescents to deliberately ignore the topic. After all, "Instagram is supposed to be something positive" (Emily, 15). The adolescents' avoidance behavior could also be a coping strategy (Lazarus, 1993). Since the adolescents partly described having the feeling that they "can't change anything anyway" (regarding the danger of Islamism; Hanna, 16), it can be assumed that conscious ignorance is an avoidance coping strategy. "I don't care, it's easier," says Hanna (16).

Discussion

The aim of this paper was to find out how adolescents could transfer their extremism-related (media) knowledge to identify Islamist-motivated content on Instagram and to clarify what factors might have a limiting effect on this transfer. In terms of answering RQ1 regarding how adolescents could apply their extremism-related media knowledge to identify Islamist content on Instagram, not all adolescents were able to do so. For some, there did not seem to be an

immediate activation of knowledge. Others made the connection with their knowledge immediately but were not able to put it into practice. Thus, the adolescents' knowledge did not seem to be sufficient to raise initial suspicion (Reinemann et al., 2019). Those who were able to apply their knowledge in the first step became "suspicious" (Franz, 16) and were able to derive evaluation criteria but were then unsure despite having reasonable suspicion.

Considering these findings, it should be noted that to a reasonable extent a gap between knowledge and action seemed to have taken place in the present sample. Thus, the transfer from knowledge to action seems to be not without preconditions. In terms of answering RQ2 regarding how situational, message, and individual factors can have limiting effects on the transfer of knowledge to action, these factors seem to have had varying negative effects on the adolescents' transfer of knowledge into practice. Situational factors are caused by the fleeting nature of the reception situation on Instagram and the overabundance of content, which means that the platform ties up a lot of attention resources. Due to the resulting unconscious and automatic usage behavior, the knowledge cannot be put into practice. Message factors negatively influence the process as the adolescents' attention can be directed by familiar visual characteristics. Thus, positive associations and perceived familiarity can lead to an automatic categorization of the Instagram post. Furthermore, even adolescents who are already applying their knowledge can be confused and unsettled by the perceived contradiction of the visual characteristics (equals positive, good) and the content of the message (equals negative, bad) and thus fail to come to the right conclusions despite well-founded suspicions. Regarding individual factors, although the role of motivation cannot be completely explained in contrast to theoretical preliminary considerations, it can be assumed that adolescents who do not feel affected or have excessive confidence in their own competencies or in Instagram's regulations are less attentive or vigilant. Thus, neither initial suspicion nor the further application of knowledge occurs. In addition, the adolescents seemed to ignore this topic, which tends to be unpleasant for them, often deliberately as a kind of avoidance coping strategy.

As far as the safety and well-being of adolescents is concerned, these results show problematic tendencies. For example, it is feared that adolescents will not (be able to) apply their knowledge. However, to reduce or completely prevent the negative influences of

Islamist propaganda, it is imperative that adolescents identify the message as such. Only then will they have some measure of control over potential media effects (Rieger et al., 2020). As with any scientific work, the results of the present study must be viewed critically against the background of some limitations. Moreover, as with any qualitative work, the present study does not permit any generalizations of the results since the underlying sample is not representative of the population. Moreover, the study is exploratory in nature, which is why there are few quantitative findings or generally relevant findings from previous studies that would confirm the tendencies and further support the assumptions in a comparison. The interpretations about the influence of different factors on the adolescents' ability to identify Islamist content are based on theoretical considerations, supported by the results at hand. Analyses over time will be necessary to further validate the interpretations. In addition, the results suggest that situational, message, and individual factors may influence each other. These more complex inter-relationships should be examined in further analyses. Finally, this study investigated German adolescents who attended high schools in Bavaria. Therefore, studies with adolescents of other school types should also be conducted to understand whether and how the influence of the various disruption factors differs.

More importantly, we need to reflect on whether these results are transferable to other countries. Since Instagram is an internationally aligned and used platform, and Islamist groups transnationally target not only German adolescents but also adolescents across Europe in the USA, we argue that these results are not specific to Germany but are also valid in countries with similar social media use and adolescent media literacy. This is also supported by the international research literature pointing to the fact that Islamist groups use similar strategies in many Western countries.

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