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More Than Meets the Eye: Understanding Political Microtargeting Processing With Gaze-Cued Retrospective Think-Aloud Methodology

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Abstract

Political microtargeting is a popular campaign tool in elections worldwide. However, it is associated with democratic risks. Foremost, scholars and policymakers are concerned that citizens cannot cope with political microtargeting and, thus, stand vulnerable to persuasion. To assess this risk, an in-depth understanding of how citizens make sense of and cope with political microtargeting is required. However, empirical studies are scarce, partially inconclusive, and provide global rather than nuanced insights. This study contributes to this research by employing an innovative, qualitative gaze-cued retrospective think-aloud design to distinguish coping patterns and, based on that, assess citizens' vulnerability to persuasion via political microtargeting (N = 25). The results reveal similarities regarding conceptual persuasion knowledge activation (i.e., advertising and targeting awareness) but differences in attitudinal and behavioral coping, illustrated along five coping patterns (avoidance, coherence assessment, ad quality assessment, partisanship bias, and neutral observation). Only individuals who cope by neutrally observing the political message seem vulnerable to political microtargeting. For individuals who cope with political messages based on their partisanship, political microtargeting might strengthen existing ties but backlash when employed by a non-preferred party. This study informs educators and policymakers about citizens' coping mechanisms with political microtargeting and their potential vulnerability, which may guide intervention and regulation decisions.

Keywords

cognition; coping; persuasion; political attitudes; targeted ads

1. Introduction

Political microtargeting has become an inherent part of modern election campaigning and is pervasive across the world (Votta et al., 2024). However, it is not a new concept: Tailoring messages to target audiences via segmentation and canvassing is a longstanding practice in political campaigning (Baldwin-Philippi, 2019). Instead, it is the precision to which a message can be adapted and efficiently distributed to a nuanced target group (Dommett et al., 2023) that fuels the hopes of political advertisers and the concerns of scholars and policymakers (European Data Protection Supervisor, 2022; Hameleers, 2023; Matthes et al., 2022; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018).

Both sentiments seem justified, considering the findings of a recent meta-analysis supporting the persuasive power of personalizing messages in general (r = .20; Joyal-Desmarais et al., 2022)—a persuasive power that is associated with many theorized benefits and risks for democracies (Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018). However, the premise for such argumentation is that citizens are vulnerable to persuasion via political microtargeting. But are they? To answer this question, this study aims to contribute to an in-depth understanding by illustrating citizens' sense-making and coping patterns with political microtargeting—how they view, recognize, evaluate, and react to it.

1.1. Theoretical Background and Current Understanding

1.1.1. Issue-Related and Identity-Based Political Microtargeting

Political microtargeting follows a simple idea: Messages congruent with one's data profile are perceived as more personally relevant, which is believed to prompt positive advertising outcomes (Krotzek, 2019). Increasingly through the use of artificial intelligence (AI; Jungherr & Schroeder, 2023), campaigners may target various characteristics (Dommett et al., 2023). This study focuses on issue-related and identity-based political microtargeting.

Issue-related political microtargeting aims to create congruence between the addressed issue and the citizen's interests and/or stances (Chu et al., 2023; Endres, 2020). While issue-related political microtargeting is not as widely used as targeting location and socio-demographic criteria—likely for feasibility reasons—it is still prevalent and ascribed significant influential potential (Bennett & Gordon, 2021; Y. M. Kim et al., 2018; Votta et al., 2024). In this study, we focus on issue-related political microtargeting based on targeting one's interests.

Identity-based targeting aims "to appeal to voters' affective attachment to their politicized social group" (Holman et al., 2015, p. 816). For example, referencing identity appeals within messages, through symbols or images of group members, may account for identity-based political microtargeting (Holman et al., 2015). Identity-based targeting has various subforms (e.g., based on one's gender or ethnic group; Hersh & Schaffner, 2013; Holman et al., 2015). We focus on identity-based targeting based on representing one's age and gender group in the visuals of an ad.

Campaigners may target individuals based on their party preferences, which could be classified as identity-based targeting. However, parties also communicate outside their voter base and ideological in-group, although to lower extents (Kruikemeier et al., 2022). Hence, in this study, we investigate political microtargeting from preferred and non-preferred parties.

1.1.2. Viewing and Processing Political Microtargeting

Personally relevant messages will be attended to and processed (see biased competition theory; Desimone & Duncan, 1995). Previous studies in commercial advertising research support that targeting may enhance personal relevance (van Reijmersdal et al., 2022) and increase visual attention (Bang & Wojdynski, 2016; Malheiros et al., 2012; Pfiffelmann et al., 2020). From political advertising research outside the microtargeting context, studies suggest that citizens selectively attend and avoid political ads according to their party preferences (i.e., *selective partisan exposure*; Marquart et al., 2016; Schmuck et al., 2020). However, there is no literature on how these relationships manifest in the context of political microtargeting.

1.1.3. Recognizing Political Microtargeting

To defend themselves against persuasion, individuals first need to recognize a persuasion attempt (Friestad & Wright, 1994). To illustrate the recognition of political microtargeting, we draw on the Covert Advertising Recognition and Effects (CARE) model (Wojdynski & Evans, 2020), which presumes factors at the individual, disclosure, message, and delivery context level.

At the individual level, citizens differ regarding their available cognitive resources and *persuasion knowledge*. Persuasion knowledge relates to individuals' advertising literacy and "helps them identify how, when, and why marketers try to influence them" (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 1). It is further distinguished by agent (i.e., knowledge about the advertiser), topic (i.e., knowledge about the addressed topic), and tactical persuasion knowledge (i.e., knowledge about the persuasive strategy; Friestad & Wright, 1994). Scholars further distinguish between conceptual persuasion knowledge (i.e., advertising awareness, targeting recognition) and attitudinal persuasion knowledge (i.e., attitudes toward the persuasion strategy and message; Boerman et al., 2018; Van Reijmersdal et al., 2023). However, persuasion knowledge is acquired over time and specific to the respective tactic. Thus, new advertising strategies might mitigate individuals' awareness of the actual dimensions of a persuasion episode and leave them vulnerable (Boerman et al., 2018; Haley, 2020). While recent insights suggest that individuals have developed some conceptual persuasion knowledge regarding political microtargeting (Minihold et al., 2024), the circumstances under which they activate this knowledge require further investigation.

Besides their knowledge predispositions, individuals seek information in and around the message to activate targeting-specific conceptual persuasion knowledge (Wojdynski & Evans, 2020). At the disclosure level, a "Sponsored" label seems effective in eliciting advertising awareness (Jansen & Krämer, 2023b; Kruikemeier et al., 2016), but the effectiveness of targeting-specific disclosures (e.g., "Why am I seeing this ad?") on targeting awareness is unclear (Binder et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2024; Jansen & Krämer, 2023a). At the message level, political fit (i.e., is the source a preferred party?) prompted targeting recognition (Binder et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2024), but the role of issue fit (i.e., is the issue of interest?) is underexplored (Hirsch et al., 2024). Findings by Hirsch et al. (2024) suggest that issue fit does not affect targeting recognition. However, they simulated issue fit via issue proximity instead of actually targeting individuals' interests. More research is needed to understand this relationship. At the delivery context level, the timing and platform may facilitate conceptual persuasion knowledge activation. While this has not been tested, Zarouali et al. (2021) conclude that individuals share an understanding of how algorithms curate online environments, which may facilitate targeting recognition.

1.1.4. Political Microtargeting, Attitudes, and Behavioral Reactions

In the persuasion literature, "coping" is neutrally defined as a means to "maintain control over the outcome(s) and thereby achieve whatever mix of goals is salient" (Friestad & Wright, 1994, p. 3). Hence, coping mechanisms refer to conscious and nonconscious attitudinal and behavioral adjustments (e.g., skepticism, attitudes, reactance, avoidance; Coping Mechanism, 2018).

Preceding studies suggest that citizens generally reject political microtargeting (Turow et al., 2012). However, recent studies indicate that political microtargeting acceptance largely depends on individuals' stances toward the source (Binder et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2024; Vliegenthart et al., 2024). These results may be rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986), which presumes that individuals categorize social environments into social groups and discriminate between in and out-group members. Furthermore, they establish their self-image and social identity based on their memberships. In turn, social identity has been shown to influence perceptions, attitudes, and behavior in favor of the in-group (Cohen, 2003). Such biased processing may even overcome situational discrepancies, where ideological beliefs become subordinate (Cohen, 2003). Applied to the current study context, individuals may be more accepting of political microtargeting by their preferred party, even if they are generally skeptical. Issue fit may also positively relate to political microtargeting acceptance, although this relationship has not yet been established in experimental settings (Hirsch et al., 2024; Vliegenthart et al., 2024).

In turn, political microtargeting seems positively related to ad and party attitudes (Chu et al., 2023; Zarouali et al., 2020), even when targeting-specific conceptual persuasion knowledge seems activated (Binder et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2024). This contrasts findings from traditional persuasion knowledge research, which suggests a negative impact of conceptual persuasion knowledge activation (for a meta-analysis, see Eisend & Tarrahi, 2022).

Regarding (intended) behavioral responses, scholars have focused on avoidance (Minihold et al., 2024; Stubenvoll et al., 2022) and voter behaviors (Chu et al., 2023; Gerber & Green, 2017; Zarouali et al., 2020). Personalization perceptions reduce ad avoidance, while privacy concerns and political microtargeting distrust increase them (Minihold et al., 2024; Stubenvoll et al., 2022). Furthermore, studies suggest that political microtargeting helps mobilize citizens during elections (Gerber & Green, 2017) and may affect (intended) vote choice (Chu et al., 2023; Lavigne, 2021; Zarouali et al., 2020). However, vote choice effects largely depend on preexisting party attitudes (Chu et al., 2023; Lavigne, 2021).

1.2. Relevance

Despite the growing body of empirical studies, we still lack an understanding of whether citizens stand vulnerable to microtargeted persuasion attempts. One reason may be that we know little about how citizens cope with political microtargeting when they encounter it. Preceding studies focused on quantitative, deductive approaches. However, to understand what coping mechanisms are available to citizens, an explorative approach is vital. We opt for an innovative, gaze-cued retrospective think-aloud design. In contrast to other quantitative and qualitative approaches, this methodology may provide unique, in-depth insights into immediate thoughts and cognitive processes in a (close-to) real-time scenario. Such insights may help to (a) inductively uncover by what means individuals *currently* cope with political microtargeting, and

whether and how citizens understand if a political message is microtargeted at them (or if this is even necessary), and (b) evaluate their vulnerability to microtargeted persuasion on the basis thereof. Such insights may contextualize preceding inconclusive findings, help policy-makers distinguish the real from the potential threats of political microtargeting, and inform scholars and educators in developing effective knowledge interventions.

2. Methodology

This study employs a gaze-cued retrospective think-aloud design (Muntinga & Taylor, 2018). This integrative method combines eye-tracking technology with a think-aloud protocol and semi-structured interviews. It is a unique way to qualitatively identify and explore patterns that reflect cognitive processes during and after stimulus exposure and overcome certain limitations of self-report measures, eye-tracking, and quantitative approaches.

For example, targeting recognition has been investigated exclusively with self-reports (Binder et al., 2022; Hirsch et al., 2024; Jansen & Krämer, 2023b). Naturally, exposure to the item wording (e.g., "These posts show personalized advertising"; Binder et al., 2022) may nudge respective elaboration processes, possibly resulting in stronger targeting recognition than was achieved by exposure to the stimuli. Think-aloud protocols and semi-structured interviews may accommodate this issue due to their open-ended format.

As another example, eye-tracking may objectively capture oculomotor motions. However, their interpretation is not objective: Fixations may correlate with interest, salience, or expert status, for example (Brams et al., 2019; Mahanama et al., 2022). Hence, causes for fixations may only be deduced. Furthermore, eye movements are not necessarily reflective of conscious and attentive processes—which, to date, may only be accounted for by means of conscious reports (Lamme, 2003). A gaze-cued retrospective think-aloud protocol, in addition to a semi-structured interview, may help distinguish between mere fixations and consciousness and attentiveness as well as uncover the reasons for it.

Lastly, quantitative research is generally limited in its ability to explore new phenomena due to the deductive approach. It may only investigate potential mechanisms that researchers are aware of or assume. In contrast, qualitative methodologies may be used in an explorative manner by means of inductive analysis approaches (Azungah, 2018).

A gaze-cued retrospective think-aloud design has limitations. As a qualitative method, the results (a) cannot be generalized to a population, (b) are not scalable, and (c) are nested within the respective research context. Also, the results may be influenced by social desirability biases, particularly considering the political context. We tried to reduce social desirability bias by ensuring anonymity and confidentiality as well as by neutral wordings, indirect questioning, and warm-up questions. Also, we did not rely on personal networks and informed individuals during recruitment that questions and contents may concern political topics.

In sum, the study may contribute to the literature by means of methodological triangulation, investigating additional layers to concurrent understandings, identifying new directions, and inspiring new avenues for future research (Flick, 2022).

All materials are available in the OSF online appendix (i.e., measures, stimulus examples, interview guidelines, hardware and software specifications, transcripts, coding schema; https://osf.io/fykaq/?view_only=6de123c1570447f1b3645716864ba591). The institutional review board at the Department of Communication (IRB-COM) of the University of Vienna, Austria, screened the study (review no. 982).

2.1. Recruitment

The sample was recruited with a survey company. Participants were required to own a Facebook account to account for some familiarity with Facebook posts, as this may affect gaze patterns (Mahanama et al., 2022). Also, they were required to reside in Austria. They were screened for having a sight deficit of ±6 diopters and higher, using varifocals, and/or having a chronic eye disease.

Participants answered an online questionnaire (approx. 5 minutes), indicating their demographics, party preferences, and interests in 10 political topics. Potential participants were invited to the lab. At a minimum, a day lay between recruitment and the lab appointment.

Data collection stopped at the point of information saturation (N = 25) while aiming for a diverse distribution of age (M = 45.52, SD = 18.59, Range = 18–76), gender (52% female), and education (32% lower, 44% intermediate, 24% higher background). Information saturation was reached when answers became repetitive and did not add any new information during the think-aloud and interviews.

2.2. Data Collection

At the lab, data was collected in three steps (approx. 30 minutes): (a) stimulus exposure, including eye-tracking, (b) gaze-cued retrospective think-aloud exercise, and (c) supplementary semi-structured interviews. Finally, participants were debriefed and compensated with 20€.

First, participants were prepared using a 5-point calibration. They viewed nine fictional Facebook posts while their gaze was recorded. They were instructed to view the posts normally as if they had appeared on their feed. The stimulus consisted of three filler and six target posts simulating political microtargeting to varying degrees. Filler posts were similar across participants. Target posts were personalized to the individual's pre-questionnaire responses and varied in terms of (a) political fit (most vs. least favored political party), (b) issue fit (three most vs. least interesting topics), and (c) visual demographic targeting (visually reflecting the participant's demographic group vs. the generic topic). If participants indicated similar party preferences, the party was randomly chosen from the respective pool (see Table 1). The order of filler and

Table 1. Overview of presented political parties.

Party seen	Preferred party	Unpreferred party
The Greens: The Green Alternative	12%	16%
SPÖ: Social Democratic Party of Austria	40%	8%
NEOS: The New Austria and Liberal Forum	16%	8%
ÖVP: Austrian People's Party	20%	24%
FPÖ: Freedom Party of Austria	12%	44%

target posts was fixed to allow for a warm-up phase in the think-aloud exercise. The order within stimulus categories was randomized. Each post was displayed on an individual page and not time-restricted.

Second, individuals performed a think-aloud task by viewing their screen recordings from stimulus exposure, including their gaze visualization. Participants were instructed to voice any thoughts that occurred. The speed of the screen recordings was set to 25% to allow for thought articulation.

Third, semi-structured interviews complemented the think-aloud exercise. The study collected data regarding individuals' ad processing and attention, conceptual persuasion knowledge activation, affective responses, and evaluative processes. Before the end, the targeted nature of the posts was disclosed, and a description of political microtargeting was provided. Upon completion, participants were debriefed about the specific study purpose and the posts' artificiality.

2.3. Data Analysis

The audio files were transcribed using the MAXQDA AI-based automated transcription function and manually corrected. No other AI-based analysis tools were used. Data analysis was based on a qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2022). In the first step, recurring themes were coded based on the interview guidelines (for the coding schema, see the OSF online appendix). In the second step, prominent cognitive cues and the respective coping patterns were identified inductively. The transcribed protocols describe the unit of analysis. Eye-tracking data was used to cue the think-aloud and semi-structured interviews but was not assessed quantitatively, as the study design did not allow for it. Specifically, each individual was presented with their own screen recordings, including a visualization of their gaze. By that, the gaze data was linked to each participant and to the think-aloud protocol and interviews. Accordingly, references to visual patterns stem from the think-aloud protocol and/or the semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, the think-aloud and interview data were analyzed in an integrative manner. The interviews intended to complement the think-aloud data in case individuals showed difficulties in carrying out the task. Therefore, we do not discern between insights from the think-aloud protocol and the semi-structured interviews.

3. Findings

3.1. Conceptual Persuasion Knowledge Activation

Regarding conceptual persuasion knowledge activation, similar patterns occurred across participants with little variation.

First, all participants recognized the advertising nature of the posts and the source. Primarily, ad awareness was achieved bottom-up, based on the posts' structure (i.e., slogans, tone), indicating tactical persuasion knowledge. Some identified the ads based on the source because they expected all party correspondence to be advertising. We did not observe top-down recognition processes; the "Sponsored—Financed by…"-disclosure played a non-significant role. A few participants mentioned the disclosure, but none referred to it as their means to identify the posts as advertisements. Some referred to the delivery context by assuming the advertising nature of the posts due to upcoming elections. Generally, most seemed aware of the persuasive intent. However, some ascribed the posts to informative rather than persuasive intent.

Second, none of the participants recognized the targeted nature of the ads, although some described the posts as personally relevant or addressing a topic of interest. Only a few revealed general tactical knowledge about political microtargeting. However, they did not apply their knowledge in the respective situation. When asked how they would evaluate whether the content was targeted, they exclusively referred to political fit—even after the description of political microtargeting was provided. The source information seemed immediately accessible to them, even through covert orienting (i.e., "attention directed to a location that is different from that on which the eyes are fixated"; Covert Attention, 2018). In sum, individuals do not seem competent to activate their targeting-specific conceptual persuasion knowledge and recognize microtargeting when an unfavored political party employs it.

3.2. Cognitive, Attitudinal, and Behavioral Outcomes

While the patterns for conceptual persuasion knowledge activation seem similar across participants, the cognitive, attitudinal, and behavioral outcomes differ significantly. In this regard, the data revealed five different coping patterns. These coping patterns can be distinguished based on the dominant first- and second-level cognitive processing cues. The dominance of a cue is evaluated based on its relevance in the coping process. Other cues may also be considered, though seemingly to a lesser extent. Our data revealed six cues individuals draw on for information regarding their coping responses. The cognitive cues and coping patterns do not represent a time- and context-consistent sociological typology but patterns of cognition and behavior that we identified within the current study context. An overview of the identified cues and how they pertain to the respective coping patterns are illustrated in Figure 1 and described in the following subsections.

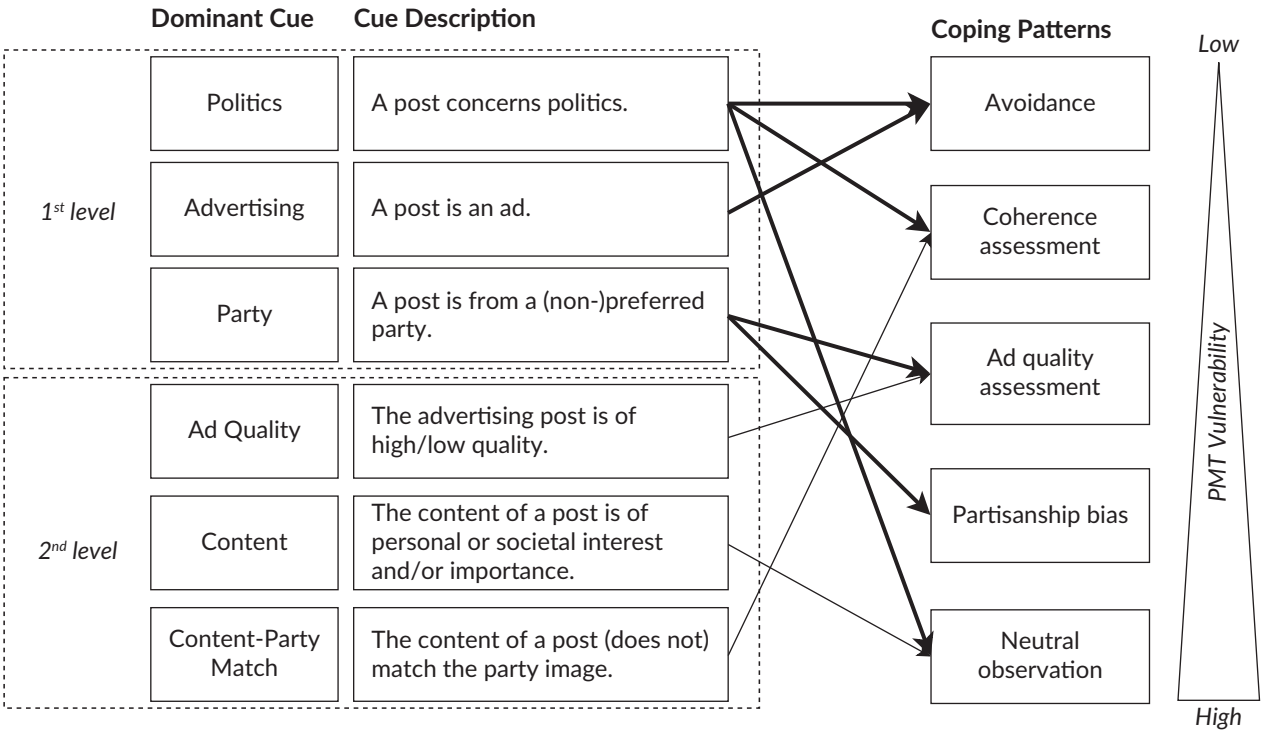

Figure 1. Overview of cognitive cues and how they pertain to different coping patterns. Notes: Bold arrows describe dominant cues at the first level, and regular arrows describe second-level cues; PMT = Political microtargeting.

3.2.1. Coping by Avoidance of All Things Political and/or Advertising

The dominant cues for individuals who engage in the avoidance pattern are either the politics or advertising cues. While both describe distinct cues, the underlying mechanisms seem similar: Recognizing the post's political or advertising nature prompts almost immediate cognitive and behavioral avoidance. The avoidance pattern may be distinguished based on the underlying rationale for individuals' avoidance behaviors. While some are generally skeptical regarding political communication or advertising (see quotes A1 and A2), others are not interested in politics and, thus, avoid political content anywhere (see quote B). Again, others avoid political content, specifically on social media, because they evaluate the environment as inappropriate (see quote C) or seek other affordances (e.g., entertainment; see quote D). Irrespective of the exact rationale, individuals who respond with avoidance seem least receptive to political microtargeting due to their almost automated visual and cognitive attention withdrawal. At most, these individuals react in terms of potential negative affect (i.e., anger), which is, however, not due to the microtargeted nature of the post but its general association with politics or advertising:

> A1 (44-year-old male, higher education): They're all liars. Okay. Really. I have something against politicians in general. Again and again, politicians say something and do something different. And they have an interest in things that are really of no interest to many people. So, they [are] just [after their] personal interests.

> A2 (54-year-old male, low education): If I see the ÖVP or SPÖ or the Greens or FPÖ or something else somewhere, I say "wipe wipe" so that it will be gone. But as I said, not just political parties; all advertising. It is so annoying. That's also one reason why I'm rarely on Facebook. I don't like when you go somewhere, and something yells at you. Yes, so then, "wipe." Then I'm really quick. I know some people say advertising is so great. But advertising annoys me, no matter what context it's in, but especially before elections, it's always a senseless time.

> B (58-year-old male, higher education): The first thought? I'm not very interested in politics. I see it more as a necessary evil. There has to be structure. So, I wouldn't actively look at these posts. Okay, maybe just before an election, so you can see what people want. However, what they promise and what they do are always two different things.

> C (25-year-old female, lower education): In politics, I don't think it should be the case that people get something through the algorithm, but that people have to seek the information, just as it was more or less before social media. So, for me, politics doesn't belong on social media.

> D (20-year-old male, intermediate education): I'll put it this way: If I really want to know something political, then I go directly to the homepage from any party. But if I'm just scrolling through feeds, I'm not like, "I want to see political things"; rather, I think to myself, "I want to see something interesting, funny—a variety of things."

3.2.2. Coping by Neutral Observation of Political Messages

The first-level dominant cue for the neutral observation pattern is the politics cue, which prompts interest and relevance perceptions. This pattern seems to correlate with a strong democratic attitude in that all ideas should be neutrally attended to. The politics cue prompts attention and cognitive engagement to (neutrally) evaluate the post's contents. On the second level, the content cue is dominant. Content perceived as catering to personal *or* societal interest prompts positive outcomes (i.e., attention, positive evaluations), whereas the opposite leads to adverse outcomes (i.e., attention withdrawal, negative evaluations). Individuals who engage in this coping pattern seem most receptive to political microtargeting, particularly at the low levels of political microtargeting-specific tactical persuasion knowledge observed in this study. Upon disclosure, these individuals did not mind the use of political microtargeting:

> A (29-year-old male, lower education): Respondent: I thought to myself, what will I say about this? Because you always add a little bit of your political attitude somewhere. That's just natural, yes. But I still try to be neutral if I see something that I evaluate as positive or neutral because I think it doesn't help if you include your political side.
>
> Interviewer: Does this attitude only apply to this situation here, or do you also do this at home when scrolling through your own social media?
>
> Respondent: I also try it at home because I think it's important to discuss things with friends in a social setting relatively neutral because, of course, you're never going to sit at a table where everyone votes for the same party or anything like that and that's why I think it's important to always remain neutral to a certain extent.
>
> B (48-year-old female, higher education): I look at it, and I'm really neutral. I look at it, then I think to myself, "Okay." I also listen to the news and look at the election slogans. I don't want to be biased and say, "Okay, I can't stand what they're doing." There's something good from everyone. Always.

3.2.3. Coping by Critically Assessing the Coherence Between Message and Sender

Similar to the neutral observation pattern, the dominant first-level cue for the critical assessment pattern is the politics cue, which elicits interest and overt visual and cognitive attention. Individuals who engage in this coping pattern reflect high (political) topic and agent knowledge based on their responses (though we did not assess it quantitatively). On the second level, individuals who engage in the critical assessment pattern focus on content–party match cues. If the message subject is perceived to match the party's image, the evaluations are positively skewed, whereas a mismatch contributes to skepticism. Content cues are also considered but are of lower order. Party preferences are straightforward and may increase skepticism toward a perceived topic–party mismatch from a non-preferred party, although in a non-dominant way. Conceptual persuasion knowledge, in the form of advertising awareness, does not prompt negative responses. Individuals who engage in this coping pattern do not seem receptive to political microtargeting but general political advertising upon perceived fit between the message and the sender:

> A (75-year-old male, lower education): That is also not so important to me. Generally speaking, there is nothing negative to say about the topic as it is described here. Because reducing bureaucracy is always

> an issue in Austria. But I'm not sure about this. I don't hear this from the party, and I don't read it either. So I'm a bit surprised that this is happening. It would be nice if it suddenly became part of the FPÖ's agenda.

3.2.4. Biased Coping Based on Partisanship

The party cue is dominant for individuals who cope with political microtargeting based on their partisanship. Hence, political communication by a preferred party is attended to with greater attention, less skepticism, positive affect, and positive evaluations. Communication by a non-preferred political party is avoided, and when it is attended to, negative evaluative outcomes are prompted. Moreover, perceived political fit leads to biased processing of the contents. For example, when topics were of low interest (according to the pre-questionnaire) but addressed by a preferred political party, the topic was ascribed higher relevance during stimulus exposure (see quote A). In contrast, when low-interest topics were addressed by a non-preferred political party, participants highlighted the low importance of the topic (see quote C). When the topic was of high interest but communicated from a non-preferred political party, participants expressed skepticism regarding the veracity of the statement and highlighted the incongruence between the party and the topic (see quote B) or even revealed a false recall associating the ad with their preferred political party. Hence, individuals who rely on their partisanship for coping with political advertising may be receptive to microtargeting by a preferred political party as it seems to strengthen existing ties (see Lavigne, 2021). However, political microtargeting by a non-preferred political party may not be correctly recalled and may even backlash due to the perceived insincerity:

> A (49-year-old female, intermediate education), responding to a post with low issue but high political fit: Then, the ÖVP again. Yes, it is the family party. It stands for family. It is the conservative party. So, it actually stands for the classic family. Family is, of course, very important. I think that too.

> B (76-year-old female, intermediate education), responding to a high issue but low party fit: Yes, I don't believe them at all. You can clearly see my political orientation right there. Those are great slogans, but I don't think they'll ever do that.

> C (49-year-old female, intermediate education), responding to a low issue and low party fit: So, the Greens. They are in government at the moment. "For culture." Yes, they are campaigning for art and culture. It's all well and good, but I would say that other issues are actually more important than art and culture at the moment.

3.2.5. Coping by Assessing the Quality of the Ad

Similarly, individuals who cope with political microtargeting by assessing the quality of the ad focus on the party cue first. Hence, such individuals will not be swayed by a non-preferred party. However, on the second level, quality cues are consulted to evaluate the advertising. Individuals' attention is focused on the components of the post (i.e., picture, slogan, logos), which are evaluated individually and in composition. The attentional focus lies on the visuals rather than the underlying message (see quote A). When visuals are perceived as unaesthetic or not meaningful, the post's message is hardly attended. Higher perceived ad quality relates to positive affect and situational attitudes toward the post, even when the ad stems from a

non-preferred political party (see quote B). Lower perceived ad quality reflects negative situational attitudes, even toward preferred political parties (see quote C). Individuals who respond to political microtargeting by assessing the formal quality and composition of the ad do not seem receptive to political microtargeting as the (personalized) message is hardly attended to. However, individuals who engaged in this coping pattern showed the strongest negative responses toward identity-based targeting, which was evaluated as "not meaningful" and irritating (see quote B):

> A (61-year-old female, higher education): And what I also noticed, by the way, is that I didn't read the text for any of the pictures above. I only ever looked at the picture. Always.
>
> B (61-year-old female, higher education): Yes, first of all, I think this face was far too big on it. It's overwhelming. But it's much more likable, somehow. So, you kind of halfway know what it's about. But that's another old lady. I know, it's probably a big hit with all the advertising agencies, I guess. So elderly women—I'm allowed to say that, I'm older myself. I'm not being discriminatory. I just think about the advertising strategy. If it says, "For what matters most. For families," then I'm photographing a family and not an old woman. Apart from the fact that I would never vote for the party anyway, because they destroy everything that makes sense in terms of social strata in this country. It's terrible. Yes, but at least the woman looks really likable, I have to say. But apart from that, I find it odd. I want to see a family when it is about family.
>
> C (61-year-old female, higher education): No, I think it's terribly done. However, I would like to highlight I usually vote for the SPÖ. I like the party very much, but the advertising story is terrible.

4. Discussion

Scholars and policymakers have argued the beneficial and detrimental democratic potentials of political microtargeting—potentials that are believed to be further accelerated by the continued advances in AI (Simchon et al., 2024). Whether political microtargeting is of any (positive or negative) significance for democratic societies largely depends on how citizens cope with microtargeted messages. While preceding studies aimed to illuminate this avenue quantitatively, this study used an innovative methodology to zoom in and provide an in-depth understanding of citizens' different coping patterns with political microtargeting to evaluate their vulnerability from a qualitative perspective.

The results provide an overview of available coping strategies that follow different cue-based rationales. Several findings are noteworthy. Most individuals seemed to know little about political microtargeting. Even when they showed some targeting-specific conceptual persuasion knowledge (objective or subjective), they did not activate it in response to the stimuli. This contrasts with preceding research that suggests that most individuals have some baseline knowledge (Minihold et al., 2024), which they may activate during a persuasion episode (Binder et al., 2022; Stubenvoll et al., 2022). This divergence might be due to the inherent challenges of capturing these variables with quizzes and self-reports. Open-ended questions for dispositional knowledge assessment and implicit approaches for measuring activation (see Hoek et al., 2021; S. J. Kim & Hancock, 2017) may be helpful.

Furthermore, none of the illustrated coping patterns represent the ideal coping behavior of informed citizens. However, only individuals who engaged in coping via neutral observation seem potentially vulnerable to political microtargeting. Others guard themselves against the persuasive attempt using critical coping (i.e., skepticism) and/or attention withdrawal, although partially in ways that seem biased by their partisanship. For some, this may question the necessity for targeting-specific persuasion knowledge. Indeed, such information (access) might not be vital, particularly considering how most individuals felt indifferent and neutral about political microtargeting upon disclosure. For individuals who engage in neutral observation, however, targeting-specific persuasion knowledge might be crucial. Due to their seemingly strong democratic attitude, knowledge about the risks of political microtargeting (e.g., filter bubbles, information asymmetries, disinformation; Zuiderveen Borgesius et al., 2018) may increase their skepticism and lower their receptiveness. Again, some may argue that few voters in the electorate respond by neutrally observing a political message. However, based on the political involvement reflected in their response patterns, these individuals seem like reliable voters, and past elections have highlighted the importance that a few votes can make. Furthermore, targeting-specific persuasion knowledge may also prove valuable for adolescents who may not be guarded by profound political knowledge, strong partisanship, and/or general skepticism toward advertising as they even tend toward more positive ad attitudes compared to past generations (van der Goot et al., 2018). However, these assumptions need distinct empirical testing in the future.

This study has limitations. First, we excluded polarizing topics from the posts (e.g., war, climate change, immigration). However, such issues may elicit stronger affective responses and negative evaluations. Research in this regard may prove valuable. Second, we cannot claim that the identified coping patterns are finite and time- and context-consistent. For example, our stimuli did not include comments. However, participants frequently attended the number of likes, and some voiced interest in the comments. Peer responses may describe another cue supporting citizens' sense- and opinion-making and should be investigated. Third, findings regarding the coping pattern "ad quality assessment" should be handled carefully because they may be caused by response bias, as some participants might have expected a marketing study purpose. Also, despite our best efforts, social desirability bias cannot be ruled out, as it even plays a role in quantitative research (Nederhof, 1985). Moreover, for identity-based targeting, we focused solely on age and gender. Other variables (e.g., race, ethnicity, religion) may prompt stronger reactions and require further investigation. Moreover, qualitative research cannot make inferential claims about how these coping patterns may manifest on a population level. For that, quantitative approaches like, for example, latent profile analysis are necessary (e.g., Minihold et al., 2024). Lastly, the study was conducted in Austria, where political microtargeting is strictly regulated. Regulation perceptions may impact participants' acceptance of political microtargeting (Haley, 2020).

5. Conclusion

This study assessed citizens' vulnerability to political microtargeting using an innovative methodology. The gaze-cued retrospective think-aloud design allowed for unique insights by inductively investigating and illustrating citizens' available coping patterns. The results give grounds for hope and concern: Generally, citizens seem capable of critically coping with political microtargeting even when unaware of their microtargeted nature. Instead, some rely on their general skepticism toward political messages and advertising or their political knowledge to assess the veracity and sincerity of a persuasive message.

However, others only guard themselves effectively against political microtargeting from non-preferred parties or seem generally responsive and, thus, more vulnerable. While educational interventions that highlight the democratic risks of political microtargeting might be a promising remedy for the latter, individuals who are primarily guided by their partisanship may be harder to reach. For these, stricter legal frameworks may be the only effective measure. Continued research is needed to determine the share of potentially vulnerable citizens so that counteractive measures can be proportionate.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

Data Availability

An online appendix for this article is available at https://osf.io/fykaq/?view_only=6de123c1570447f1b3645716864ba591

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