Article

What Does "Being Informed" Mean? Assessing Social Media Users' Self-Concepts of Informedness

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Abstract
In recent years, much research has—more or less candidly—asked whether the use of social media platforms is "making us dumber" (Cacciatore et al., 2018). Likewise, discussions around constructs such as the news-finds-me perception or illusions of knowledge point to concerns about social media users being inadequately informed. This assessment of inadequacy, explicitly or implicitly, builds on the ideal of the informed citizen with a broad interest in current affairs who knows about all important societal issues. However, research has largely ignored what citizens themselves understand as "being informed." Accordingly, this research project asks what people actually want to be informed about, which user characteristics predict different self-concepts of informedness, and how both of these aspects relate to feelings of being informed in the context of social media platforms. Based on a preregistered, national representative survey of German social media users (*n* = 1,091), we find that keeping up with news and political information is generally less important for people than staying informed about their personal interests and their social environment. However, feelings of being informed through social media are most strongly predicted by how suitable a given social media platform is perceived to be for keeping up-to-date with current affairs. This suggests that while information needs are diverse and related to different sociodemographic and personal characteristics, most people indeed seem to associate "being informed" with political information and news.

Keywords
feelings of being informed; information needs; self-concepts of informedness; social media

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1. Introduction

Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have become important information sources for online users worldwide (Newman et al., 2021). Clearly, one of the main benefits of using social media seems to be that one can access all kinds of content under one roof—be it information about what goes on in the life of one's friends and family, updates related to own interests, or reports about current affairs. However, studies investigating social media information use usually equate information with political information and news in a narrow sense. Moreover, this strand of research often takes a deficit perspective, worrying that users are (increasingly) insufficiently informed. Thereby, just as their "old media" counterparts (e.g., Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Jerit et al., 2006), these studies build on the normative ideal of the informed citizen who not only continuously stays informed about current affairs but also has a sound knowledge of the democratic system (Schudson, 1998). The ideal is implicit in studies investigating social media usage patterns such

as the passive news-finds-me perception or the superficial "news snacking" (Molyneux, 2018). It is explicit when studies correlate social media news use with perceived (e.g., Leonhard et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2016) or actual political knowledge (e.g., Cacciatore et al., 2018; Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019), without asking which amount of knowledge is actually "meritorious" for citizens (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018, p. 228).

Of course, in a democratic system, contributing to an informed society is one of the media's main functions. However, not only has the ideal of the informed citizen been described as too demanding (Moe, 2020), it also implies the aforementioned focus on political information when analyzing users' (feelings of) informedness. Consequently, there is limited knowledge about what "being informed" actually means for social media users—what and how much they aim to know about news and politics and which *other* information is relevant for them. Such user-centric research is needed to create a shared reality between researchers and respondents, thus allowing not only for improving measurements of (social media) information use but also for a greater understanding of its effects (see also Vraga et al., 2016).

Accordingly, this research project asks people directly what they want to be informed about, and it investigates which user characteristics are associated with different self-concepts of informedness, and how both of these aspects relate to feelings of being informed (FOBI) in the social media context. Employing a preregistered, national representative survey of German social media users (*n* = 1,091), we thus aim to enlighten the confusion around the "informed" user by applying a more holistic understanding of informedness and investigating its predictors.

2. Social Media and the Puzzle of the "Informed" User

2.1. Self-Concepts of "Being Informed"

Several attempts interrogate the "informed citizen" concept from a user perspective, with user concepts often resembling the aforementioned ideal (e.g., Hartley & Pedersen, 2019; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018). However, supporting this ideal is mainly rooted in the perceived moral duty to be informed; only rarely do people seem to have a genuine interest in the news. Moreover, people often cannot meet the high standards of the ideal and thus feel only "approximately informed" (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018). Although the mentioned studies provide a more realistic and user-centric account of informedness, they are also one-dimensional in their focus on political information. Research conducted in the tradition of the uses and gratifications approach has well established the notion that people not only turn to (social) media for using news or political information but also for entertainment, passing time, or social interaction (e.g., Phua et al., 2017; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Indeed, people do not only need information about current affairs to orient themselves and lead their lives. For a holistic understanding of informedness, we draw on information needs as defined by Hasebrink and Domeyer (2010), who build on a social understanding of information as subjectively new and/or useful.

Following the classification by Hasebrink and Domeyer (2010; see also Hasebrink, 2016), undirected information needs are based on users' general need for information about and surveillance of their environment. Users driven by these needs may search for news, be it from their neighborhood or the United Nations. *Topic-related information needs* result from users' personal interests and hobbies. They comprise information about specific subject areas that are important for users, be it pop music or pie baking. In order to socially integrate, people also have *group-related information needs*. They refer to information about social groups relevant to an individual, such as family, friends, or colleagues. Finally, people develop *problem-related information needs* when trying to handle a certain situation, such as passing an exam or changing a tire. However, since these needs are, in contrast to the first three, situation-specific and not context-independent, we do not include them as a subdomain of informedness.

In addition to this breadth of informedness, which individually might encompass any combination of undirected, topic-, and group-related information needs, we also focus on the (desired) depth of informedness. We acknowledge that people may consider all domains relevant but simultaneously are "experts, informed citizens" and "men in the street" (Schütz, 1972, p. 86)—that is, having a deep knowledge is not equally important for every subject area. For example, users could be fine with scanning news snippets on Facebook while being "issue junkies" (Elsweiler & Harvey, 2015) when it comes to running or their romantic partners.

Thus, our conceptualization of informedness comprises four subdomains: (a) breadth of informedness *and* depth of informedness regarding (b) undirected, (c) topic-, and (d) group-related information needs. We first investigate which characteristics influence these self-concepts of informedness, focusing on sociodemographic characteristics (income, gender, age, education) and personality traits, namely political interest and the "fear of missing out" (FOMO). While there are a plethora of possible factors influencing self-concepts of informedness, we deliberately decided to concentrate on a set of core constructs for this first investigation. Specifically, for the personality traits, we wanted to include one factor each for which the literature suggests an association with the information needs that differ the most: the more news- and publicly-oriented undirected information needs and the more socially- and personally-oriented group-related information needs (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2010).

Considering the depth of informedness regarding undirected information needs, we focus on political interest, defined as the "degree to which politics arouses

a citizen's curiosity" (van Deth, 1990, p. 289) and the attention people pay to politics. It is well established that politically interested users consume more news, search for them more actively, and know more about politics than those with lower political interest (e.g., Möller et al., 2020; Shehata & Strömbäck, 2021; Strömbäck & Shehata, 2010). Conversely, low political interest is associated with sparse news use, increased news avoidance, and lower levels of political knowledge (e.g., Boukes, 2019; Goyanes et al., 2021). Additionally, research shows that the news-finds-me perception (the belief that one can be informed without actively using news) is more prevalent among the less politically interested (Gil de Zúñiga & Diehl, 2019; C. S. Park, 2019). Taken together, these findings indicate that politically interested people have pronounced undirected information needs, aiming to gain deep knowledge about current affairs. Thus, we hypothesize:

> H1: The higher social media users' political interest, the more important it is for them to have a deep knowledge of international, national, and regional events/affairs (dependent variable: depth [undirected information needs] of informedness).

Considering the depth of informedness regarding group-related information needs, we investigate the role played by social media users' FOMO. It is defined as a "pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences from which one is absent" (Przybylski et al., 2013, p. 1841), leading to a desire to constantly stay connected with what others are doing. Based on the psychological need for belonging, FOMO thus drives some to continuously seek the social information needed to determine their position in the social hierarchy (Przybylski et al., 2013). Social media platforms are considered an especially suitable resource for keeping in touch with peers, and FOMO has been found to be associated with more intensive use of social media (e.g., Bloemen & De Coninck, 2020; Franchina et al., 2018). Combined, these findings suggest that for users who experience more FOMO, group-related information needs (i.e., having a deep knowledge of their peers) will be particularly important, leading to the following hypothesis:

> H2: The higher social media users' FOMO, the more important it is for them to deeply understand their personal social environment (dependent variable: depth [group-related information needs] of informedness).

In addition to these specific hypotheses for two of the subdomains of informedness, we also want to explore the influence of sociodemographic characteristics, political interest, and FOMO more broadly. Research suggests that sociodemographic characteristics should influence self-concepts of informedness both indirectly, through their relation to the studied personality traits, and directly.

For example, studies show that FOMO is mainly experienced by the young (e.g., Bloemen & De Coninck, 2020; cf. Milyavskaya et al., 2018) and that political interest is more prevalent among men and citizens with higher formal education (e.g., Easterbrook et al., 2016; Fraile & Sánchez-Vítores, 2020). In terms of a more direct influence, research shows that young adults are more susceptible to the feeling of information overload in the context of news (Beaudoin, 2008; Schmitt et al., 2018) and to news avoidance (Trilling & Schoenbach, 2013), suggesting that a deep current affairs knowledge is less important for them as compared to older users. However, several aspects of the relationship between sociodemographic characteristics, personality traits, and the different self-concepts of informedness remain unclear, leading us to consider the following comprehensive research question:

> RQ1: What influence do sociodemographic characteristics and personality traits have on the four subdomains of the self-concept "being informed" ([a] breadth and depth regarding [b] undirected, [c] topic-related, and [d] group-related information needs)?

2.2. Feelings of Being Informed Through Social Media Platforms

While self-concepts of informedness alone only tell us what social media users want to know about, they do not indicate how well informed people feel through social media platforms. Accordingly, we also aim to address users' FOBI and investigate their relation to self-concepts of informedness as well as related user characteristics. FOBI refers to users' meta-cognition of what they think they know—their subjective knowledge (Müller et al., 2016). To date, research on FOBI through social media has mainly taken the deficit perspective described above, measuring "illusions of knowledge" in relation to the ideal of an informed citizen (e.g., Leonhard et al., 2020; Müller et al., 2016; Schäfer, 2020). Moreover, it has not been addressed how self-concepts of informedness are associated with global FOBI: Does it make a difference for how well informed people feel depending on their personal importance of different information needs?

Research suggests that the extent of feeling informed might be influenced by how "demanding" one's self-concept of informedness is: If users do not aim to gain a deep understanding of a topic, FOBI should occur more easily. Indeed, people less politically interested and formally low educated—for whom, we assume, extensive informedness about news is less important—tend to express higher FOBI about current affairs (e.g., Leonhard et al., 2020; C. Park, 2001). Conversely, as mentioned above, those who share the ideal of the informed citizen often feel only superficially informed as they cannot meet their goals (Hartley & Pedersen, 2019; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018). However, being interested in a topic (that, therefore, is important within one's self-concept) might

also foster FOBI. It seems reasonable that the more important a topic is for users, the more information they gather about it, and—as familiarity has proven to be the main prerequisite for FOBI (e.g., C. Park, 2001; Schäfer, 2020)—the more informed they feel. Moreover, interest should also increase elaboration that, in turn, enhances not only one's factual but also one's subjective knowledge (Yang et al., 2020). Considering that users turn to different (social) media channels for different information needs (Hasebrink, 2016), another important factor influencing FOBI could be the perceived suitability of social media platforms for keeping up-to-date. For example, if a user thinks that Twitter is suitable for staying informed about current affairs, this should increase FOBI through Twitter. This is also supported by uses and gratifications research showing that different social media platforms are associated with different gratifications, with, for example, Instagram and Snapchat being perceived as more suitable for social interaction than Facebook or Twitter (Alhabash & Ma, 2017; Kim & Kim, 2019). Due to this mixed evidence and to take a broad look at the predictors of FOBI and their interdependencies, we consider the following research question:

RQ2: What influence do sociodemographic characteristics, personality traits, self-concepts of informedness, and the perceived suitability of social media platforms for keeping up-to-date have on users' FOBI through social media platforms?

Digging deeper into two of these predictors, it seems sensible to consider possible interaction effects between self-concepts of informedness and the perceived suitability of social media platforms for keeping up-to-date. If a specific topic area is important to a user of a certain social media platform and they perceive it as a suitable source of information on said topic, they should feel better informed. Conversely, if a user perceives the platform as an unsuitable source of information, they should feel less well-informed by it. Moreover, users who consider a platform less suitable for specific information needs may process the information encountered there more critically (Griffin et al., 1999), which might also hinder FOBI. Accordingly, we propose:

H3: The depth of informedness and the perceived suitability of social media platforms for keeping up-to-date interact in such a way that:

(H3a) When the importance of having a deep knowledge of a topic area is high, and the perceived suitability of social media platforms for keeping up-to-date on this topic area is high, users' FOBI through social media platforms will be stronger;

(H3b) When the importance of having a deep knowledge of a topic area is high, and the perceived suitability of social media platforms for keeping up-to-date

on this topic area is low, users' FOBI through social media platforms will be weaker.

3. Method

All hypotheses, the design, sampling, and analysis plan for this study were preregistered before data collection started (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/CM7UY). Moreover, we have made the questionnaire, data, and analysis scripts available in an OSF repository (https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/82MTK).

3.1. Sample

This study uses data from a national online survey conducted in Germany in December 2021. The panel provider *respondi* was contracted to recruit participants using quota sampling to ensure a demographic distribution resembling the German online population in terms of gender, age, education, and monthly household net income. Overall, 1,140 participants passed the quota screening and completed the entire questionnaire.

Reflecting tendencies reported in other studies focusing on the social media use of the German online population (Hölig et al., 2021), Facebook was used, at least rarely, by most participants (only 9.8% of participants reported never using Facebook), followed by Instagram (33.2% non-use), and Twitter (62.6% non-use). Only 49 participants reported using neither Facebook, Instagram, nor Twitter and were thus classified as non-social media users. While we started from the premise that there might be more non-social media users in the sample and that it might be interesting to conduct additional exploratory analyses on whether non-social media users and social media users differ in their self-concepts (see preregistration), we decided to exclude all non-social media users from the analyses reported hereafter.

Accordingly, our final sample consists of 1,091 German social media users (gender: 49.3% female; age: $M = 47.0$, $SD = 14.8$; education: 32.4% low, 32.1% medium, 35.6% high; monthly household net income: 17.8% < 1.500€, 71.9% between 1.500 and 4.999€, and 10.3% ≥ 5.000€).

3.2. Measures

3.2.1. Self-Concepts of "Being Informed"

Building on the theoretical conceptualizations described above, the self-concept "being informed" focuses both on the breadth and the depth of informedness. To assess the breadth of informedness, participants are asked how important it is for them, personally, to keep up-to-date on the following areas/aspects:

1. international events/affairs;
2. national events/affairs;
3. regional events/affairs;

4. own thematic interests;
5. own hobbies/leisure activities;
6. close social environment (e.g., friends, family);
7. wider social environment (e.g., colleagues, acquaintances).

Participants provided their answers on a 7-point scale ranging from "not important at all" (1) to "very important" (7). Overall breadth of informedness was then calculated with a sum index of all seven items (i.e., the higher the score [max: 49], the broader the self-concept of informedness; M = 33.8, SD = 8.4).

To assess the depth of informedness, participants were presented with a two-item semantic differential ranging from 1 to 7, focusing on the aforementioned seven areas/aspects surveyed in succession (i.e., starting with international events/affairs). Participants are asked to think about the respective area and rate the following two opposing statements:

1. "It is enough for me to be informed about the most important developments in this area" (1) through "It is important for me to be informed about all developments in this area" (7).
2. "With topics from this area, it is enough for me to know about them roughly" (1) through "With topics from this area, it is important for me to know all the details" (7).

The first three areas are conceptualized as being related to undirected information needs and are summarized to a sum index of "depth (undirected)," (M = 25.0, SD = 9.1 [max: 42]). The fourth and fifth areas are conceptualized as being related to topic-related information needs and are thus summarized to a sum index of "depth (topic-related)" (M = 19.3, SD = 6.1 [max: 28]). The last two areas are conceptualized as being related to group-related information needs and are summarized to a sum index of "depth (group-related)" (M = 18.5, SD = 5.9 [max: 28]). For all three indices, a higher score indicates an increased importance of having a deep knowledge of the respective areas/aspects. Correcting for the different number of items in the three sum indices, we see that depth regarding topic-related information is most important for people, followed by depth regarding group-related information, and, lastly, depth regarding undirected information. However, we also find medium-to-strong correlations between all four self-concepts of being informed (r ranging from .385 to .569; see Table A2 in the Supplementary File), suggesting that people who (do not) aim to be thoroughly informed show this tendency across all information areas.

3.2.2. Feelings of Being Informed Through Social Media Platforms

Adapting earlier conceptualizations of FOBI (Mattheiß et al., 2013; Müller et al., 2016), participants were asked to rate four items (e.g., "my [platform] use allows me to keep up-to-date well") on a 7-point scale ranging from "does not apply at all" (1) to "fully applies" (7). In contrast to previous measurements, the items were not focused on news or politics but were deliberately phrased to represent a broad understanding of "being informed." Depending on participants' self-reported social media use and response rates for this question, one of the three platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) was used instead of the placeholder "[platform]." For example, if a participant reported that they used Twitter and Instagram and we had—at the time of the survey—less data for FOBI through Twitter, the participant got the questions for Twitter. Participants' overall FOBI was calculated with a mean index of all four items (M = 3.88, SD = 1.85, ω_h = .97).

3.2.3. Political Interest

Political interest was measured using the five-item Short Scale Political Interest (SSPI; see Otto & Bacherle, 2011). Participants provided their answers on a 7-point scale ranging from "does not apply at all" (1) to "applies fully" (7). A mean index of all five items was calculated (M = 4.49, SD = 1.69, ω_h = .95).

3.2.4. Fear of Missing Out

FOMO was measured using the ten-item Fear of Missing Out Scale (Przybylski et al., 2013). Participants provided their answers on a 7-point scale ranging from "does not apply at all" (1) to "applies fully" (7). A mean index of all ten items was calculated (M = 3.48, SD = 1.32, ω_h = .88).

3.2.5. Perceived Suitability of Social Media Platforms for Keeping Up-To-Date

For every social media platform that participants reported using at least rarely, they were asked how suitable these platforms are for keeping up-to-date about the aforementioned three areas related to undirected, topic-related, and group-related information needs: (a) international, national, and regional events/affairs; (b) own thematic interests and hobbies/leisure activities; (c) personal social environment. Participants provided their answers on a 7-point scale ranging from "not suitable at all" (1) to "very suitable" (7). Twitter was perceived to be most suitable for undirected information needs (M = 4.11, SD = 1.94), Instagram was perceived as most suitable for topic-related information needs (M = 4.63, SD = 1.80), and Facebook most suitable for group-related information needs (M = 4.51, SD = 1.86).

For more information about the measures, please see the descriptions in the preregistration. Descriptive statistics for all variables of interest (Table A1) and zero-order correlations (Table A2) are available in the Supplementary File.

4. Results

To investigate predictors of social media users' self-concepts of informedness (RQ1), we computed four hierarchical linear regression models, predicting the sum indices of (a) the breadth and depth of informedness for (b) undirected, (c) topic-related, and (d) group-related information needs, respectively (see Table 1).

Sociodemographic variables (gender, age, education, and income) were included first, with the mean indices of political interest and FOMO included in a second block. All four dimensions of informedness were positively associated with both political interest and FOMO, with political interest being the strongest predictor for breadth of informedness (β = .54, p < .001) as well as the depth of informedness for undirected (β = .56, p < .001) and topic-related information needs (β = .31, p < .001). At the same time, FOMO emerged as the strongest predictor for group-related information needs (β = .28, p < .001), confirming H1 and H2. Relationships between participants' self-concepts of informedness and sociodemographic variables were less clear-cut. For breadth of informedness, participants' age (β = .08, p = .003), a high formal education level (β = .18, p = .006), and the top three income levels emerged as significant predictors. In contrast, only a somewhat high income level was related to the depth of informedness for undirected and topic-related information needs. Finally, depth of informedness for group-related information needs was predicted by (female) gender (β = .21, p < .001) and the medium income steps.

To investigate predictors of social media users' FOBI by a particular social media platform (RQ2), we computed a hierarchical linear regression model predicting said variable (see Table 2). In addition to this preregistered model (designated as Model 1), we also considered a model that not only includes the social media platform participants reported their FOBI for (Facebook, Instagram, or Twitter) but also the frequency of platform use (designated as Model 2), allowing us to better account for usage intensity. Sociodemographic variables (gender, age, education, and income), the specific social media platform the participant reported their FOBI for, and—in the case of Model 2—frequency of platform use were included first. The mean indices of political interest and FOMO were included in the second block, the four self-concepts of informedness in the third block, and the perceived suitability of the respective social media platforms for keeping up-to-date was included in the fourth block. Last, we included interaction effects of depth of informedness and the perceived suitability of social media platforms for keeping up-to-date in the fifth block.

In Model 1, FOBI was positively associated with political interest (β = .10, p = .001), FoMO (β = .09, p < .001), and the social media platform's perceived suitability to fulfill undirected information needs (β = .53, p < .001), with the latter being the strongest predictor overall. This suggests that participants associate FOBI through social media mainly with information about news and current affairs. Furthermore, both Instagram (β = −.11, p = .040) and Twitter (β = −.30, p < .001) were negatively associated with FOBI as compared to Facebook, indicating that the social media platform most used by the participants is also the one by which they feel best informed. This is confirmed by the results in Model 2, in which the frequency of platform use (β = .31, p < .001) emerged as the second strongest predictor, coming right after the perceived suitability to fulfill undirected information needs (β = .48, p < .001). While the influence of political

Table 1. Linear regression models predicting self-concepts of informedness among social media users.

Model	Breadth		Depth: Undirected		Depth: Topic-related		Depth: Group-related	
Predictors	β	p	β	p	β	p	β	p
Block 1								
Gender: Female [a]	.037	.440	−.044	.380	−.001	.992	**.213**	<.001
Age	**.077**	.003	.052	.062	.011	.734	.012	.714
Education: Medium [b]	.062	.291	−.069	.274	.085	.248	.136	.063
Education: High [b]	**.179**	.006	−.048	.482	.139	.080	.036	.649
Income: Step 2 [c]	.124	.080	.058	.446	.156	.075	**.215**	.015
Income: Step 3 [c]	**.172**	.018	−.004	.957	.095	.289	**.233**	.010
Income: Step 4 [c]	**.324**	<.001	**.160**	.049	**.212**	.025	**.270**	.004
Income: Step 5 [c]	**.264**	.005	.092	.365	.188	.110	.193	.102
Block 2								
SSPI	**.544**	<.001	**.560**	<.001	**.310**	<.001	**.169**	<.001
FOMO	**.195**	<.001	**.095**	<.001	**.099**	.002	**.275**	<.001
Intercept	−.275	<.001	.002	<.001	−.206	<.001	−.353	<.001
Adj. R²	.437		.362		.140		.134	

Notes: Standardized regression coefficients (significant predictors in bold), n = 1,091; SSPI stands for Short Scale Political Interest and FOMO for "fear of missing out"; [a] reference category: not female; [b] reference category: low; [c] reference category: Step 1 (lowest income).

Table 2. Linear regression model predicting FOBI through a social media platform.

Predictors	Model 1		Model 2	
	β	p	β	p
Block 1				
Gender: Female [a]	.078	.068	**.092**	.020
Age	−.029	.238	.008	.734
Education: Medium [b]	−.065	.218	−.072	.141
Education: High [b]	−.071	.218	**−.108**	.044
Income: Step 2 [c]	−.047	.461	−.041	.484
Income: Step 3 [c]	−.004	.949	.013	.833
Income: Step 4 [c]	.044	.526	.027	.672
Income: Step 5 [c]	−.099	.239	−.114	.146
Platform: Instagram [d]	**−.106**	.040	−.023	.633
Platform: Twitter [d]	**−.304**	<.001	−.003	.961
Frequency of platform use			**.305**	<.001
Block 2				
SSPI	**.099**	.001	**.104**	<.001
FOMO	**.091**	<.001	**.092**	<.001
Block 3				
Breadth of informedness	−.035	.247	−.040	.152
Depth: Undirected	−.018	.076	−.020	.194
Depth: Topic-related	−.002	.422	.007	.565
Depth: Group-related	.013	.683	.019	.633
Block 4				
Suitability: Undirected	**.527**	<.001	**.477**	<.001
Suitability: Topic-related	.125	.403	.057	.929
Suitability: Group-related	.117	.352	.085	.720
Block 5				
Depth: Undirected × Suitability: Undirected	.034	.095	.019	.311
Depth: Topic-related × Suitability: Topic-related	.018	.403	.016	.441
Depth: Group-related × Suitability: Group-related	.016	.454	.020	.319
Intercept	.145	<.001	.028	.501
Adj. R²	.563		.621	

Notes: Standardized regression coefficients (significant predictors in bold), *n* = 1,091; SSPI stands for Short Scale Political Interest and FOMO for "fear of missing out"; [a] reference category: not female; [b] reference category: low; [c] reference category: Step 1 (lowest income); [d] Reference category: Facebook.

interest (β = .10, p < .001) and FoMO (β = .09, p < .001) remained largely the same, gender (β = .09, p = .020) and a high education (β = −.11, p = .044) also reached statistical significance in this model. The coefficients suggest that—controlling for all other variables—females are more likely to feel informed through social media platforms, while a high formal education level is negatively associated with FOBI. No further significant predictors emerged, including the hypothesized interaction effects specified in H3.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

While social media platforms provide citizens with the opportunity to address various information needs and simultaneously keep up with current events, their friends, and hobbies, research to date has largely equated "being informed" with being informed about news and politics. Acknowledging that the normative ideal of the informed citizen is likely too demanding for most people (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018) and that informedness from a user perspective also entails subjectively important information about one's interests and social environment (Hasebrink & Domeyer, 2010), this study set out to investigate social media users' self-concepts of informedness and their relation to FOBI.

On a mere descriptive level, our findings show that keeping up with news and political information (i.e., addressing undirected information needs) is generally less important for people than staying informed about their personal interests (topic-related information needs) and their social environment (group-related

information needs). Looking at the predictors of the different self-concepts of informedness, our findings consistently show a significant positive association with the relatively stable dispositional traits political interest and FOMO—although to different extents. As expected based on prior research, political interest emerged as the strongest predictor for the depth of informedness regarding undirected information needs (i.e., the higher social media users' political interest, the more important it is for them to have a deep knowledge of international, national, and regional events/affairs). Likewise, FOMO emerged as the strongest predictor for the depth of informedness regarding group-related information needs, suggesting that people who worry about being out of touch with the experiences of their peers have an increased interest in being informed about all developments across their extended social environment. The influence of sociodemographic characteristics was less clear-cut: The most notable findings are that group-related information is more central to female users' self-concepts and that older social media users and those with a high formal education strive to be more broadly informed. Looking at the predictors of the different self-concepts of informedness, it becomes apparent that the variation of depth regarding topic-related (*adj. R^2* = .14) and group-related (*adj. R^2* = .13) information needs is explained noticeably less well by the predictors than the depth regarding undirected information needs (*adj. R^2* = .36), implying that additional characteristics or traits might be important for these dimensions of informedness. While we concentrated on a set of core constructs for this first investigation, future research could include a more diverse set of predictors, aiming both at the more news- and publicly-oriented information needs (focusing, for example, on variables such as users' internal political efficacy; see Lu & Luqiu, 2020), and particularly the more topically and socially oriented information needs. For this, constructs such as the need for affect (Anspach et al., 2019) or users' contextual age (Sheldon & Bryant, 2016) could be considered, which have been shown to be associated with various aspects of informational social media use. Another finding that stood out was that all self-concepts were fairly highly correlated, suggesting that some social media users seem to be "information junkies" across the board, while others care neither for news nor information about their hobbies or friends. In terms of directions for future research, this points to the need to also consider more overarching personality traits such as the need for cognition (Cacioppo & Petty, 1982).

Thus, while information needs are diverse and undirected information needs are, overall, the least important for German social media users, most of them indeed seem to associate "being informed" with political information and news, echoing findings of previous research (Hartley & Pedersen, 2019; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018). This became apparent when looking at what determines whether people (subjectively) feel informed

through using social media. By far, the strongest predictor of FOBI was the perceived suitability of a given social media platform to address undirected information needs (i.e., how suitable the platform is for keeping up-to-date about international, national, and regional events/affairs). However, this finding might also have been influenced by our methodological design. Although we specifically created our FOBI measure to accommodate the different concepts of informedness, people still seemed to predominately associate terms such as "keep up to date" or "know about what is happening in the world around me" with news or current affairs information. Moreover, FOBI was assessed at the very beginning of the questionnaire, so participants had no contextual cues from the later questions about the importance of different information needs. Thus, future research might consider not only how to survey informedness as unbiased and openly as possible but also how to conduct more qualitative research to investigate how self-concepts of informedness inform *actual* social media use, how people balance suitability with convenience, or the extent to which they feel able to reach their individual goals of "being informed." This will help "bolster the 'thin' abstract concepts of citizen ideals with 'thick' concepts that are meaningful to, and guide, people in their everyday lives" (Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2018, p. 242).

The frequency with which one uses a platform showed the second strongest association with FOBI, indicating that people feel better informed by social media platforms the more they use them (see also Müller et al., 2016; C. Park, 2001). Echoing research on media trust that shows that (German) online users tend to trust the news brands they use more than the news media in general (Newman et al., 2021, p. 81), this could be a kind of familiarity effect: people feel better informed because they are used to the platform's features and more comfortable with the information they receive there. However, the association could also result from a more "pragmatic trust" (Schwarzenegger, 2020) in that social media users trust the platforms they use most simply because they use them often, and thus they also feel better informed by them. Against our expectations, we did not find evidence for the proposed interaction effects between the desired depth of being informed about a certain topic area and the perceived suitability of a social media platform for keeping up-to-date about said topic area, which might at least partly be explained by the narrow understanding of informedness discussed above. Indeed, focusing just on *undirected* information needs, an exploratory simple slopes analysis (see Figure A1 in the Supplementary File) suggests that the association between depth regarding undirected information needs and FOBI tends to become negative when the perceived suitability of social media for addressing undirected information needs is low. Accordingly, if it is important for people to have a deep knowledge of international, national, and regional events/affairs, but they feel that their social media are not able to keep them up-to-date

about these issues well, they feel less informed. However, considering that this was only the case for undirected information needs and that none of the interaction effects reached statistical significance in either of the FOBI models, further work is required to investigate the interplay between self-concepts of informedness, platform perceptions, and FOBI.

Overall, while our findings help enlighten some of the confusion surrounding the "informed user," they also raise new questions. If we want to be open to concepts of informedness that go beyond the normative ideal of the informed citizen, then we also need to find new ways to measure that informedness. Although this study provides some initial insight into what kind of information is important for social media users and how this importance can be explained, more research on self-concepts of informedness needs to be undertaken. This will not only help researchers to develop more realistic ideas of what it means to "be informed" for citizens nowadays but also to better examine and understand the effects of (social media) information use.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

Supplementary Material

Supplementary material, the replication code, and data for this article are openly available at https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/82MTK.

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