Original Article

Constructions of Antisemitism on Social Media

A Content Analysis of Emerging Adults' Media Diaries

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Abstract: Expressions of antisemitic hate abound on social media today, reinvigorating ancient stereotypes around Jewish people and their history. The current user-centered study examined the shapes and the extent of antisemitic stereotypes from the point of view of emerging adults and their daily social media consumption. Emerging adults (N = 47) between 18 and 30 years of age were asked to keep guided media diaries of their social media activity over a period of 21 days (February to May 2022), zooming in on Jewish people, Jewish life, the Middle East conflict, and other topics associated with Jewry. A sample of N = 1,024 threads from a variety of social media channels was collected, encompassing textual and visual material. Qualitative content analysis was used to determine the presence of antisemitism, how explicit/implicit it was, and the types of argumentation used to support antisemitic claims. Frequency analysis and Chi-Square tests yielded beyond-chance patterns in the data. Findings reveal a high prevalence of explicit Israel-related antisemitic discourse encountered by emerging adults on social media, as well as highly ambiguous and implicit content that eludes easy detection by emerging adult users. Findings also point to the highly interactive nature in which antisemitism is co-constructed online.

Keywords: Antisemitism, antisemitic hate speech, emerging adults, hate speech, Israel-related antisemitism, social media

Antisemitic hate speech is widespread on the Internet and social media (Anti-Defamation League, 2022) and has risen sharply since the escalation of the Middle East conflict in October 2023 (Rose et al., 2023). Such platforms serve as moral laboratories for young people (Thomas et al., 2017; Vogelsang, 2014) and as breeding grounds for public opinion and exclusionary attitudes (Lee & Jang, 2010; Neubaum & Krämer, 2016; Schäfer et al., 2022). Here, emerging adults form their views of themselves, others, and diversity, shaping both Jewish and non-Jewish group identities (Buhin et al., in press; Kansok-Dusche et al., 2023).

Despite the central role of social media in emerging adults' lives, research on antisemitic discourse in their media use remains limited (Waquas et al., 2019). Social media shape and contest socio-political attitudes and identities (Buhin et al., in press; Kaakinen et al., 2020; Soral et al., 2018) and amplify broader discourses, making them key sites for the normalization or resistance of antisemitism (Hübscher & von Mehring, 2022). Young adults encounter more hateful content than any other group (ADL, 2023; Geschke et al., 2019) and are particularly vulnerable due to the fluidity of their identities in this formative stage (Kroger et al., 2010; Orth et al., 2015; Thomas et al., 2017; Vogelsang, 2014). A cross-national survey found that most 18- to 25-year-olds had recently encountered hate speech on social media, often during routine use (Reichelmann et al., 2021), suggesting exposure is nearly inevitable and underscoring the urgency of examining young adults' experiences.

The present study addresses this urgency in a context that is both historically and socially significant: Germany, where public debates about antisemitism are shaped by the legacy of the Holocaust and strong sensitivities to antisemitic discourse. By including both Jewish and non-Jewish emerging adults, we capture diverse perspectives on what appears in their social media feeds. Data collection occurred before October 7, 2023, providing a unique baseline for understanding antisemitism online prior to the recent Middle East escalation. Unlike crawler- or AI-based detection (Becker et al., 2021; Schwarz-Friesel, 2019), our guided media diary emphasizes everyday user exposure.

Research on Hate Speech Online and Hate Speech Effects

Hate speech is verbal aggression against groups or their members based on markers such as religion, race, gender, or sexual orientation, derogating the group as a whole (Erjavec & Kovačič, 2012; Siegel, 2020). It has serious consequences, including anxiety, fear of harassment, and sleep loss (Anti-Defamation League, 2022; Keipi et al., 2017), and its effects extend beyond direct targets (Cruz, 2021; Odağ et al., 2023; Soral et al., 2018). Non-targets may also internalize derogatory views, especially when less attuned to hate speech (Soral et al., 2018). The lack of recognition and normalization of hate online further fosters prejudice, ideological divides, and exclusionary attitudes (Hsueh et al., 2015; Lee & Jang, 2010; Neubaum & Krämer, 2016; Wachs et al., 2019).

Despite the active research on online hate speech (Siegel, 2020), antisemitism has been underexplored. This is even though antisemitic hate is among the most frequent types of hate expressed online (Geschke et al., 2019), and social media is where Jewish people feel most directly threatened (ADL, 2023; FRA, 2018; Hübscher & von Mehring, 2022; Zick et al., 2017). There is also a lack of user-centered research on the forms of antisemitism confronting emerging adults, the most active social media users (Izquierdo Monterao et al., 2022; Matamoros-Fernandez & Farkas, 2021). Recent surveys show that emerging adults are exposed to hate speech on social media more than any other age group (Geschke et al., 2019), mostly during routine activity online (Reichelmann et al., 2021). The study addresses these gaps. It includes non-Jewish and Jewish users and therefore has the strength of including emerging adults' feeds that can be presumed to be diverse with regard to the content of interest.

Manifestations of Antisemitic Hate Online

Antisemitism is a longstanding yet evolving phenomenon (Schwarz-Friesel, 2019). Classic tropes of Jews as evil or deceitful persist online (Hübscher & von Mehring, 2022), alongside the "Happy Merchant" meme and Holocaust denial narratives that trivialize remembrance and historical significance (Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz, 2013; Zannettou et al., 2020). Online expressions include denying the Holocaust, blaming Jews for their fate, or downplaying its impact with statements such as "it wasn't just the Jews" (Burke et al., 2020). Antisemitism also adapts to modern contexts, for instance, through COVID-19 conspiracy theories linking Jews to the pandemic (ADL Blog Report, 2020; Gerstenfeld, 2020).

A significant modern form of antisemitism targets Israel, often blurring the line between political critique and hate speech (Becker, 2021; Markl, 2018). These new forms allow antisemitism to be expressed without direct reference to Jews (Rensmann, 2015). Clearly, not all Israel-related criticism is antisemitic, and the debate about Israel-related antisemitism is highly controversial, as it often involves complex discussions about the boundaries between legitimate criticism of Israel and antisemitic rhetoric. Frameworks such as the IHRA definition (2016), Sharansky's 3-D test (2004), and Schwarz-Friesel's linguistic analysis mark discourse as antisemitic when it involves demonization[1], double standards[2], derealization[3], decontextualization[4], or dehumanization[5] (Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz, 2013). Such strategies stigmatize Israel as a brutal aggressor, echoing historical antisemitic conspiracies like the blood libel and Nazi slogans (Becker, 2021). Antisemitic portrayals often oversimplify the Middle East conflict, casting Israel as the sole aggressor and ignoring Islamist violence (Amadeu Antonio Foundation, 2021; Markl, 2018). As the Amadeu Antonio Foundation (2021) notes, "the complexity of the regional conflicts and positions of the parties are ignored, with Israel declared the sole warmonger" (p.16). Classic antisemitic tropes – revenge, conspiracy, child murder – are redirected at Israel, with criticism of Israel serving as a socially acceptable substitute for openly antisemitic beliefs (Binstok et al., 2024).

The debate over Israel-related antisemitism remains highly contentious. The Jerusalem Declaration on Antisemitism (JDA, 2021) offers an alternative to the IHRA definition, emphasizing a context-based approach to differentiate between political criticism of Israel and antisemitism. The JDA asserts that harsh criticism of Israel is not inherently antisemitic unless it involves Jew-hatred, double standards, or collective blame. But the dispute over where to draw the line between legitimate criticism and

[1] „Dämonisierung"; Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz, 2013, p. 222 in the German original, translated into English by the authors of the current paper.
[2] „Doppelte Standards"; Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz, 2013, p. 215 in the German original, translated into English by the authors of the current paper.
[3] „De-Realisierung"; Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz, 2013, p. 210 in the German original, translated into English by the authors of the current paper.
[4] „Dekontextualisierung"; Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz, 2013, p. 216 in the German original, translated into English by the authors of the current paper.
[5] „Dehumanisierung"; Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz, 2013, p. 224 in the German original, translated into English by the authors of the current paper.

antisemitic rhetoric continues to shape political, academic, and policy discussions.

Blatant Versus Subtle Expressions of Hate Online

Scholars distinguish between explicit hate speech and subtler, covert forms (Becker & Troschke, 2023; Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016; Paasch-Colberg et al., 2021). Explicit hate involves direct threats or insults, while subtle hate relies on recurring negative attributions, such as linking crime to immigrants, or on seemingly positive stereotypes like "Jews are good with money" (Ben-David & Matamoros-Fernandez, 2016; Hartvigsen et al., 2022). Metaphors, sarcasm, and coded language often mask implicit messages (ElSherief et al., 2021; Wiegand et al., 2022). Because they frequently evade automated detection, implicit hate requires human interpretation (Hartvigsen et al., 2022; Ocampo et al., 2023).

Online antisemitism also appears in explicit and implicit forms. Explicit hate employs violent or dehumanizing language ("Israhell your hell is coming!", "Zionists are rats"; Becker, 2021; Schwarz-Friesel, 2019), while implicit hate uses indirect references ("East-Coast bankers," "Israel-Lobby") or disclaimers ("I have many Jewish friends") to mask intent. Although recognized in corpus-linguistic studies, this distinction remains underexplored in young adults' social media feeds. Implicit hate often goes unnoticed (Schmid et al., 2024), yet both forms affect all viewers: non-targets react more to explicit hate, while targets are highly sensitive to subtle forms (Leets & Giles, 1997; Odağ et al., 2023). Both types cause psychological harm, normalize prejudice, and deepen divides (Geschke et al., 2019; Soral et al., 2018), underscoring the need for coping strategies and closer analysis (Wachs et al., 2021).

Goals of the Current Media Diary Study

This study adopts a user-centered approach to examine antisemitism in the social media feeds of emerging adults, using a media diary method followed by content and frequency analyses. Because little is known about the specific discourses young adults encounter, we ask:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): What manifestations of antisemitism appear in their everyday social media use (18–30 years old in Germany)?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How directly do emerging adults encounter antisemitism on social media? Specifically, how are antisemitic expressions distributed across blatant and subtle forms?

In line with prior research that identifies antisemitic Israel critique as a modern and most accepted from of antisemitism (Markl, 2018; Rensman, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2018; Schwarz-Friesel, 2019), we hypothesize that Israel-related critique is the most explicit form on social media (Hypothesis 1, H1), while Holocaust denial, conspiracy myths, and antisemitic stereotypes occur less frequently (Hypothesis 2, H2) and more implicitly (Hypothesis 3, H3; Hübscher & von Mehring, 2022; Becker & Troschke, 2021). While earlier studies have examined the social and interactive features of hate speech more broadly (e.g., Walther, 2025), little is known about which interactive elements specifically shape antisemitic messages. To address this, we ask:

Research Question 3 (RQ3): What elements such as hyperlinks, emojis, commenting, and hashtags contribute to the social construction of antisemitism on emerging adults' social media feeds?

Method

Data Collection and Monitoring

We use a guided diary method to capture users' daily exposure to antisemitism in a naturalistic way, allowing participants to document media encounters in their own time and context (Redmiles et al., 2019). This reveals their preferred platforms and highlights discourses around Jewish life, without requiring them to label content as antisemitic. Classification is handled by the research team while closely mirroring young people's everyday social media use.

For a period of 3 weeks between February and May 2022, we asked emerging adults to use their social media accounts as usual, without creating new accounts or joining new groups. They were instructed to be mindful of posts related to themes such as Jewish life, antisemitism, the Holocaust, Israel, Zionism, the Middle East conflict, and Jewish conspiracy myths (see instructions in the online supplement, https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/osfstorage/69662360e68ae11a0e5fa117). Importantly, the data were collected prior to October 7, 2023, allowing for the capture of manifestations of antisemitism on social media during a period unaffected by the subsequent escalation of conflict in the Middle East.

Participants uploaded relevant content – text, images, or videos – into a personalized cloud folder to protect privacy, with a screenshot and link to ensure we captured content before it was removed. Participants only sent us content that was publicly available, rather than posted in closed groups. They could reach out to the research team during biweekly Zoom sessions for questions or support. Uploaded links were

verified daily by the research team, captured in high-resolution screenshots, and subsequently deleted from the cloud folder for data protection. To manage data volume, we limited collection to the first 50 comments per post.

Data Analysis: Content and Frequency Analyses

Data underwent qualitative content analysis, followed by frequency analyses and Chi-Square tests. This mixed-methods approach combined qualitative interpretation with quantitative analysis (for a similar argument, see Creamer & Ghoston, 2013). To develop the coding scheme, we drew directly on the definitional debates reviewed above. Specifically, we integrated elements from widely used definitions of antisemitism, such as the IHRA working definition and Schwarz-Friesel's work (2019), as well as conceptual distinctions between explicit and implicit antisemitism. In this way, the coding categories were not constructed ad hoc but grounded in existing definitional frameworks while adapted to the empirical material encountered in participants' diaries (this nuance is reflected in our 22-page-long Coding Scheme in the online supplement, https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/uh34g).

The coding scheme was developed to translate research questions into four categories: (1) Presence of antisemitism, (2) Location, (3) Directness, and (4) Shapes (in the online supplement, https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/osfstorage/67adb0fb45ab80c9525314bf for sub-categories). Each category was thoroughly defined and anchored with specific linguistic examples from the data.

In Category 1, coders assessed media diary entries for potential antisemitism[6] on both macro (entire thread) and micro (individual comments) levels, (see Coding Scheme in the online supplement, https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/uh34g). In a thread deemed potentially antisemitic on the macro level, coders classified smaller units (comments or visuals) as antisemitic, non-antisemitic, or unclear. The remaining categories were coded only for units identified as "potentially antisemitic" in Category 1, while all others were excluded from further analysis.

In the units of coding identified as "potentially antisemitic", Category 2 identified where antisemitism appeared – lead post, comments, or both – and its form, such as text, image, username, video, meme, emoji, GIF, sticker, hashtag, hyperlink, or other. Category 3 examined the directness of antisemitism in line with our distinction between explicit and implicit forms. Category 4 examined the specific shapes in which antisemitism was put forward, comprising a list of Israel-, Holocaust-, conspiracy-, or Jewish stereotypes-related arguments. We applied stringent scholarly definitions to code conservatively and avoid missing potential antisemitism (Becker, 2021; IHRA, 2016; Schwarz-Friesel, 2019; see Coding Scheme in the online supplement, https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/uh34g). Israel-related critique was coded as "potentially antisemitic" when it (1) reflected black-and-white and reductionist interpretations of the Middle East conflict, (2) labeled Israel as "Israhell" or an oppressor, (3) claimed to have an unquestionable claim to truth when defaming the state of Israel, rejected dissenting views as an "antisemitism cudgel" (Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz, 2013), (4) accused it of Apartheid (Markl, 2018), (5) denied its right to exist (e.g., using the phrase "from the river to the sea" calling for the erasure of the state of Israel from the map; Sharansky, 2004), or (6) called for violence and boycotts (e.g., BDS, which singles out Israel, evokes historical boycotting of Jewish businesses, and delegitimizes Israel's existence; ADL, 2024).

Multiple coders[7] applied the coding scheme to ensure interrater reliability (see Table 1 in the online supplement for Kappa-scores, https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/osfstorage/67adb0fb45ab80c9525314bf). With over 1,000 diary entries and 21,000 fragments (see below), the manual coding was a massive undertaking that demanded over a year of sustained, rigorous analysis. In the pilot phase, coders attended a workshop where the coding scheme was introduced and tested in trial sessions, helping to establish a common understanding of categories. In the main phase, data were divided into work packages: Category 1 was coded by team members at all levels, with uncertainties flagged and later reviewed by more experienced coders. Remaining issues were resolved collaboratively, after which the final codes were applied and interrater reliability calculated. Categories 3 and 4,

[6] We deliberately employed the term *potential antisemitism* in our coding scheme to account for the fact that many instances in the data involved highly implicit or indirect expressions of antisemitism. In such cases, interpretation was required to identify antisemitic undertones, and the qualifier "potential" acknowledges this layer of ambiguity. For content that was explicitly antisemitic (for example, Holocaust denial or perpetrator-victim reversals), the term is clearly less appropriate; however, we were unable to fully resolve this linguistic dilemma. To underscore the often *subtle* nature of antisemitic constructions on social media, we nevertheless chose to consistently apply the term *potential antisemitism* throughout our analysis.

[7] Our team consisted of three students, two advanced doctoral students, and two mid-career psychologists. It was diverse in terms of disciplinary focus, age, country of origin, religion, and gender. The diversity of experiences and expertise helped us develop a rich understanding of the theory behind our coding and our media diary sample. Furthermore, experiences with discrimination based on religious, national, and gender identities allowed our coders to develop a sensitive and nuanced understanding of the coded material and arrive at a shared understanding of our coding categories.

due to their theoretical complexity, were coded only by advanced members. Because of our highly detailed team engagement with the coding scheme, agreement ranged from 0.77 to 0.94, indicating strong to near-perfect reliability (Landis & Koch, 1977)[8]. Coding was conducted with MAXQDA 2022 (VERBI Software, 2021).

Procedure

The study provided close supervision and support for participants' media diary activity. Recruitment materials explained study goals, tasks, and €80 compensation for ~8 hours of work. Participants attended online or in-person sessions, signed consent forms (see online supplement, https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/osfstorage/69662437e68ae11a0e5fa1f1, and received detailed instructions). Check-in sessions in English and German offered ongoing support, and debriefing included current antisemitism research and contacts for community and mental health organizations. The study was approved by the ethics committee of Touro University Berlin (IRB number 01-22) and adhered to strict data protection policies.

Sampling and Participants

We purposefully sampled a heterogeneous group of emerging adults varying in age, nationality, Jewish/non-Jewish heritage, and gender. Recruitment took place in Germany, where the historical legacy of antisemitism makes it a crucial context for examining its contemporary online manifestations. Including both Jewish (n = 10) and non-Jewish (n = 37) respondents allowed us to capture perspectives from both targeted and non-targeted groups. Participants were recruited via the project's social media channels, authors' professional networks (e.g., training and sports organizations), the largest Jewish weekly newspaper in Germany (Jüdische Allgemeine), and university courses. Inclusion criteria required participants to be 18–30 years old, active on social media, and living in Germany for at least six months.

Between February 2 and May 23, 2022, a total of 47 participants (n = 33 female, n = 13 male, n = 1 nonbinary) between the ages of 19 and 32 (M = 24.17, SD = 3.92) took part in the study. Participants identified as German (n = 26), US American (n = 2), Ecuadorian (n = 2), Finnish (n = 1), Israeli (n = 4), Indian (n = 3), Mongolian (n = 1), Mozambican (n = 1), Ukrainian (n = 3), or European. Most (n = 31) lived their entire life in Germany and were well-educated, having completed (n = 14) or pursuing (n = 26) their BA degree. Others completed a degree at a university of applied sciences (n = 1), vocational training (n = 1), an MA degree (n = 2), or a PhD degree (n = 1). Most participants reported being not very religious (n = 40 rated themselves between 0 and 4 on a 10-point scale) and identified as politically left-leaning or moderate (n = 40 placed themselves between 0 and 4 on a 10-point scale of left-to-right-leaning). N = 10 participants identified as Jewish. Most participants were frequent consumers of social media, spending between 4 and 6 hours (n = 21) or 6+ hours (n = 14) online daily. Participants reported using Instagram (n = 41), YouTube (n = 38), and Facebook (n = 17) most frequently, followed by X/Twitter (n = 11), TikTok (n = 8), Snapchat (n = 9), Reddit (n = 3), Pinterest (n = 2), and Jodel (n = 1).

Results

Antisemitism on Macro-and Micro-Levels of Social Media Threads (RQ1)

We received a total of N = 1,024 social media threads from participants, which came from a large variety of social media platforms, including Instagram, X/Twitter, Facebook, TikTok, YouTube, Reddit, Pinterest, LinkedIn, and Jodel – but predominantly Instagram (see Figure 1). The total of social media threads entered into media diaries comprised 21,006 units of coding. On the macro level, that is, the level of the entire thread, 604 or roughly 59% were coded as "potentially antisemitic" (Figure 2a and b). On the micro level, most frequently representing individual comments, 5,203 or about 25% of units of coding were coded as "potentially antisemitic" (Figure 2b).

Types (RQ1) and Directness (RQ2) of Antisemitic Arguments in Social Media Comments

Our micro-level coding suggests that hate against Jewish people is most frequently expressed implicitly (see examples in the online supplement https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/osfstorage/67ac58e085b1dc62f5595ee4): n = 3,350 or 65% of units of coding that were coded as potentially antisemitic (n = 5,203) expressed antisemitism in this subtle way. A much smaller portion was coded as explicitly

[8] *Category 2: Location of antisemitism* focused solely on identifying observable and manifest indicators, without requiring interpretation. In this category, coders were tasked with noting where antisemitism appeared within the data. The determination of whether a specific segment was antisemitic, and which segments were, was made in *Category 1: Presence of antisemitism*. As a result, an interrater score was not calculated for *Category 2* (for the difference between latent and manifest meaning in qualitative content analysis, see Schreier, 2012; Kracauer, 1952).

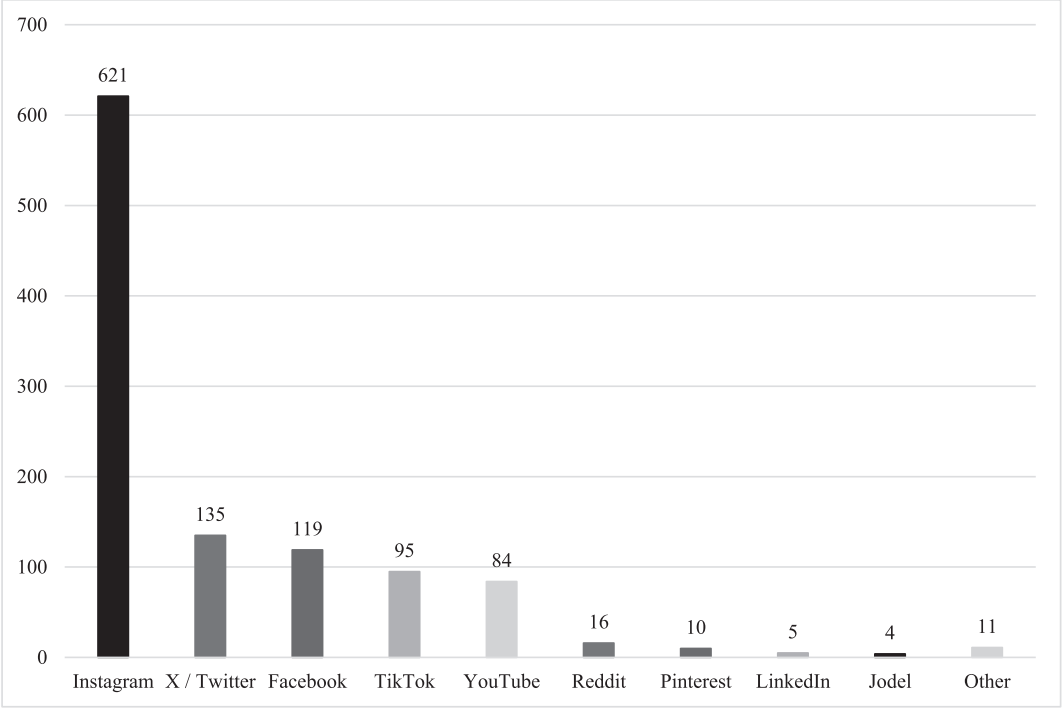


Figure 1. Platforms from which we received our samples of posts.

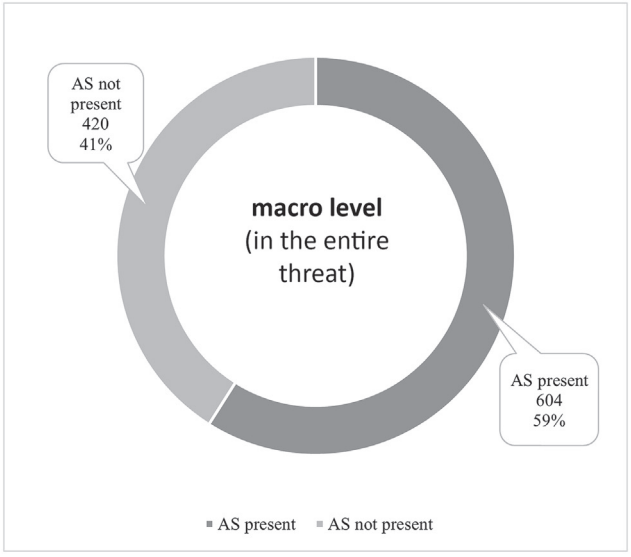
antisemitic, conveying blatant expressions of hate speech against Jewish people (1.840 units or 35% of the sample; see Figure 3).

Our micro analysis indicates that most material coded as "potentially antisemitic" is Israel-related (ca. 33%; see Figure 4). Not all critiques of Israel are classified as antisemitic (see our examples in the online supplement of (non-) antisemitic Israel critique https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/osfstorage/68bae594f0aae4b7bf74e7f5). Antisemitic Israel-critique relies on simplistic, black-and-white portrayals of the Middle East conflict, depicting Israel as the sole aggressor. Some examples include (1) derogatory language like calling Israel "Israhell" or labeling it an oppressor, (2) presenting accusations against Israel as absolute truths while aggressively rejecting counterarguments and dismissing criticism as an "antisemitism cudgel", (3) branding Israel as an Apartheid state, (4) denying its right to exist, such as through the phrase "from the river to the sea," which might imply its erasure, and (5) advocating for actions like boycotts and sanctions that reject the Jewish people's right to self-determination.

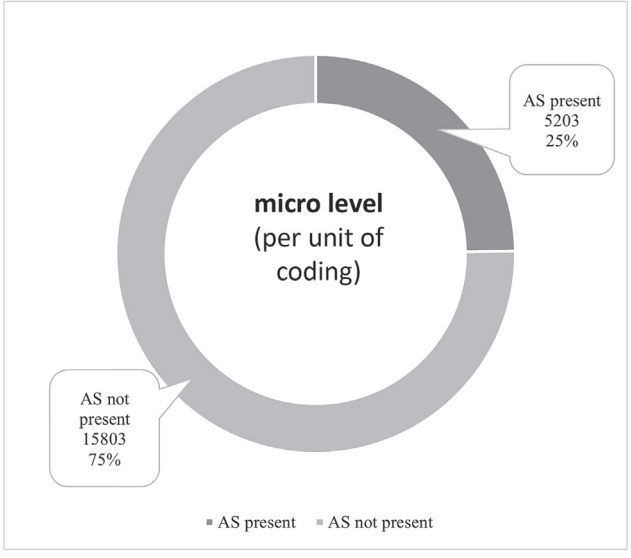
The second most common category on the micro level is confirming comments (18.6%) – a category developed inductively from the media diaries. These are comments that do not create new antisemitic content, but support antisemitism generated by other users, keeping offensive threads visible. (see Figure 4; see also examples in the online supplement: https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/osfstorage/679cdbdc3b7f04d90d0ead98). Oftentimes, such comments constitute an emoji, such as a red heart, a thumbs-up emoji, or a smiling emoji, in support of a preceding antisemitic lead argument.

The third most numerous (and inductively generated) category consists of units of coding which, in the process of expressing support for Palestine, also involve antisemitic language and visuals or are posted as a response to an unrelated topic (13.8%; see Figure 4 and examples of confirming comments in the online supplement: https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/osfstorage/679cdbdc3b7f04d90d0ead98). An example falling into this category includes comments expressing support with Palestine – be it as a statement "Free Palestine!", as a "#freepalestine" hashtag, or an emoji of a Palestinian flag – posted as a response to a lead post commemorating the life of a Holocaust survivor. It is important to emphasize that we do not consider the display of a Palestinian flag or support for the Palestinian people inherently antisemitic. We only labelled such expressions as antisemitic if they were made in response to an already antisemitic argument or if their meaning was antisemitic in the context in which they occurred.

A relatively large proportion of our units of coding on the micro level make direct references to the National Socialism, the Third Reich, and Adolf Hitler (12%, see Figure 4). In this, users demand breaking free from the past and from the responsibility to remember and honor the victims of the Holocaust (so-called "Schlussstrich" in



(a)



(b)

Figure 2. (a) Proportion of antisemitic posts on the macro level in the sample. (b) Proportion of antisemitic units of coding (i.e., Fundstellen) in the sample.

German). Such arguments often draw direct parallels between today's atrocities and the Holocaust, thus trivializing its nature and scope, while others call into question whether the Holocaust took place. A related type of argument is the so-called "claim to truth" ("Antisemitismuskeule" in German), suggesting that any criticism of Jewish people or Israel is immediately met with accusations of antisemitism (9% in our data). The term "Antisemitismuskeule" is a German compound word that translates to "antisemitism cudgel". It is often used metaphorically to describe the perceived use of accusations of antisemitism

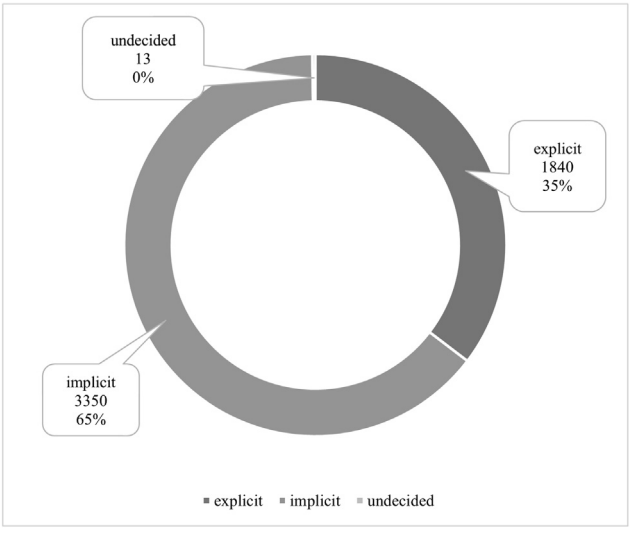


Figure 3. Directness of the expressions of antisemitism.

as a political weapon to silence criticism or delegitimize opponents, especially in debates related to Israel. Its use reflects a contentious debate about the boundaries between free speech, legitimate criticism, and prejudice.

Conspiracy myths about Jewish people and/or Israel allegedly controlling the world, governments, or industries constitute another form of argumentation on the micro level (8.2% in Figure 4). Similarly, often appearing in tandem with conspiracy myths are classical stereotypes about Jewish people (7.8%), villainizing and demonizing Jewish people by ascribing demon-like characteristics to them, including references to the blood libel. More rarely, though no less disconcertingly (less than 1%), Jewish people are presented as animals with subhuman characteristics (e.g., by using rat or pig emojis).

Antisemitic Israel-Critique: The Most Explicit Form of Antisemitism?

To test our hypotheses, we cross-tabulated frequencies relating to directness of expressions with the frequencies of potentially antisemitic arguments and conducted a Chi-Squared test of independence on the two samples of codes (see Table 2 at https://osf.io/k4ys3/files/osfstorage/67adb0fb45ab80c9525314bf for observed, expected, Chi-Squared values, and standardized residuals). The analysis indicates a significant relationship: $X^2(26, N = 5.877) = 1.828{,}9$, $p < .001$. Standardized residuals indicate that potentially antisemitic Israel-critique is more often expressed explicitly than other forms of antisemitism, thus supporting Hypothesis 1.

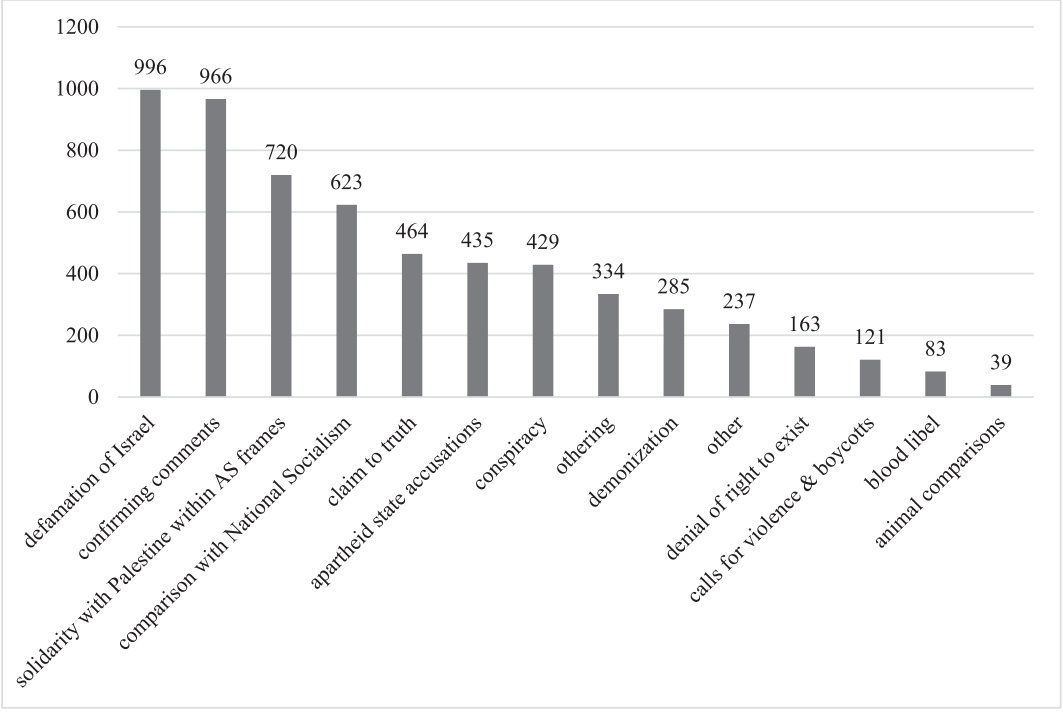


Figure 4. Antisemitic argumentation patterns.

Other types of antisemitism (such as National Socialism related antisemitism: n = 622; conspiracy myths: n = 430; classical antisemitic stereotypes: n = 405) are expressed less frequently than Israel-related antisemitism (n = 1,708), thus supporting Hypothesis 2. This picture is especially accentuated by two types of antisemitic arguments with higher-than-expected frequencies in our data: (1) confirming comments (n = 971) and solidarity with Palestine within antisemitic frames (n = 722). Both categories are data-driven, inductive categories often occurring in the context of Israel discussions, thus adding to the high number of Israel-related expressions of antisemitism in line with Hypothesis 2. Both are implicit expressions of Israel-related antisemitism, however, contrary to Hypothesis 1.

While potentially antisemitic arguments are more often coded as implicit expressions of antisemitism (for instance, claims to truth, conspiracy myths, confirming comments, and solidarity with Palestine within antisemitic frames; see Table 2 in the online supplement), we could still not fully confirm Hypothesis 3: We had predicted the share of non-Israel-related antisemitism to be more frequently implicit. But as mentioned, the most frequent implicit instances of potential antisemitism are found in confirming comments and solidarity with Palestine within antisemitic frames connected specifically to Israel-critique, thus countering Hypothesis 3. Additionally, classical stereotypes, including Judeophobic devaluation, blood libel, and animal and vermin comparisons, are coded more frequently as explicit expressions of antisemitism than expected, also countering Hypothesis 3.

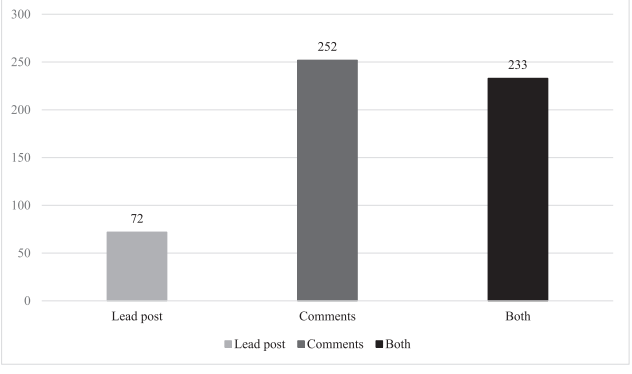


Figure 5. Appearance of antisemitism in social media threads.

Multimodal and Interactive Construction of Antisemitism on Social Media (RQ3)

Our macro-level analysis indicates that potential antisemitism most frequently appears in the comments sections of threads (n = 252; Figure 5). This suggests that potentially antisemitic content can appear under posts that are not hateful, making it more difficult to detect and report to the respective platforms. Potential antisemitism in only

the lead post appears relatively infrequently (n = 72). It is much more often that, if antisemitism appears in the lead post, it is also likely to appear in the comments section (n = 233).

Furthermore, our macro-level analysis indicates that potential antisemitism on social media is constructed multimodally, primarily through text (see Figure 6; n = 522) and emojis (n = 267). Various hashtags (n = 171) – such as "#apartheidisrael", "#israhellgotohell", or "#IsraHell" – images (n = 130), videos (n = 76), and memes (n = 42) help antisemitic messages gain more traction online. At times, though rarely, antisemitism is signaled by the profile picture (avatar) and/or handle of users spreading hateful messages (Figure 6).

Adding to this picture are the two inductively generated categories for our micro-level analysis: confirming comments (n = 971) and solidarity with Palestine within antisemitic frames (n = 722). Both categories highlight the interactive nature of antisemitism construction at the micro-level, illustrating how social engagement mechanisms contribute to the spread and normalization of such content.

Discussion

This study highlights the urgent need to address antisemitic hate speech on social media, which plays a central role in emerging adults' lives and shows the highest prevalence of anti-Jewish content (ADL, 2023; Geschke et al., 2019). Such content is not limited to fringe forums like 4chan or 8chan but appears in everyday discourse on mainstream platforms like Instagram, YouTube, TikTok, and Facebook, reaching wide audiences as young adults navigate identity and intergroup beliefs. Our media diary approach examined this exposure (RQ1) in a robust dataset of 1,024 threads comprising 21,006 coding units.

We distinguished between two levels of analysis: macro (entire threads) and micro (individual coding units, such as comments). At the macro level, 59% of threads in participants' diaries contained potentially antisemitic elements, while at the micro level, about 25% of units were coded as such. This shows that threads can be antisemitic overall, even if not every comment contributes to this characterization, highlighting the cumulative and contextual nature of antisemitism on social media. Such dynamics underscore its complexity and point to important considerations for interventions.

We found that online antisemitism occurs predominantly in implicit forms (RQ2), which makes detection and mitigation more challenging (Becker & Troschke, 2023). The fact that 65% of potentially antisemitic content in the analyzed sample was expressed subtly highlights how antisemitism often manifests through veiled and indirect language. While this proportion indicates that implicit expressions were more common, we acknowledge that the boundary between explicit and implicit antisemitism is not always clear-cut, and many cases occupy a gray zone. The important takeaway is that, regardless of how one draws this line, a substantial share of the antisemitic content encountered by emerging adults was conveyed implicitly. Implicit expressions often evade moderation, appearing innocuous or requiring contextual knowledge to detect (Becker & Troschke, 2023). Users may also downplay them as unintentional or harmless (Schmid et al., 2024). While explicit antisemitism made up 35% of cases, a troubling level often linked to Israel, implicit forms were more prevalent, underscoring the need for interventions beyond surface-level moderation. Educational research shows that nuanced media competence trainings, which strengthen critical thinking and constructive coping, can mitigate harm, but their effectiveness depends on users' ability to recognize hate, which is especially difficult when it is implicit (Buhin et al., in press; Wachs et al., 2023).

Within the rubric of implicit antisemitism, the data reveal a concerning pattern in the antisemitic framing of *support for Palestine*. While support for Palestinian rights is clearly not inherently antisemitic, the study finds that such expressions are frequently couched in ways that evoke antisemitic connotations. This underscores the need for scrutiny of the language and context used in political discussions related to the Middle East (Schwarz-Friesel, 2019). Equally troubling in this context are *confirming comments*, which amplify pre-existing antisemitic speech without generating new content, and play a crucial role in sustaining and normalizing offensive narratives. The use of seemingly benign symbols like *thumbs up*, *red hearts*, *smiling faces,* or *faces with tears of joy* to support potentially antisemitic arguments not only increases the visibility of hateful threads but also makes them harder to flag and moderate. Both practices (the antisemitic framing of support for Palestine and confirming comments) reflect the *social production* of antisemitism, created collectively by "networks of antagonists" and a "'virtual community' (Walther, 2025, p. 10), with the intention to attract a sense of approval by and belonging to a social group. Such messages' "primary purpose is to communicate with other[s]… than to antagonize its victims" (p. 11) while their unintended impact constitutes "collateral damage" (Walther, 2025; p. 10). At the same time, whether intended or not, such messages have dire consequences for targets (FRA, 2018; Hübscher & von Mehring, 2022; Zick et al., 2017), and lack of intention is often a justification for young people to excuse or overlook hateful speech online (Buhin et al., in press). In our view, the networked, collective identity-confirming functions of antisemitism production online are a much-needed avenue for future studies (Odağ et al., 2024).

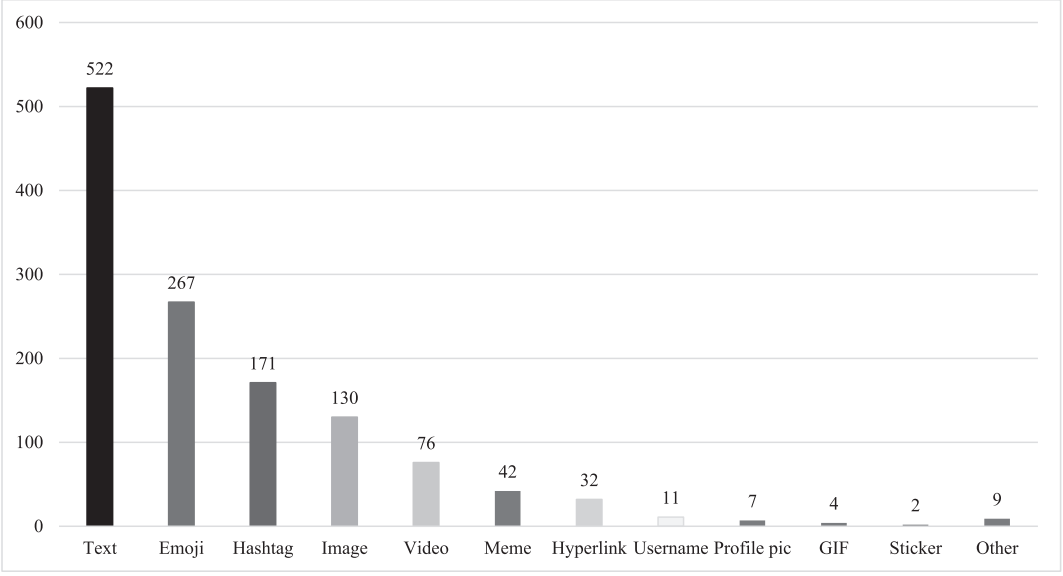


Figure 6. Interactive means through which antisemitism is constructed.

Our study also highlights a more explicit dimension of online antisemitism: the explicit entanglement of criticisms of Israel with antisemitic rhetoric. Here, we refer once more to the contentious debate in the scholarly literature on what constitutes antisemitic Israel-critique. Our coding was conservative in the sense that we applied more stringent definitions of Israel-related antisemitism of the IHRA (2016), Sharansky (2004), and Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz (2013) to our data. In line with other studies that have used these definitions, our study confirms the high amount of antisemitic Israel critique in the context of emerging adults' social media use (Markl, 2018; Rensman, 2015; Rosenfeld, 2018; Schwarz-Friesel, 2019) and identifies a high frequency of instances where such critiques overtly cross into potential antisemitism, often through reductionist, hostile, and defamatory narratives (we presented examples of this in the online supplement along with examples of Israel critique that we would consider *not* antisemitic). The fact that 33% of the antisemitic arguments analyzed fell into the category of potential Israel-related antisemitism underscores the prevalence of such rhetoric (supporting H2), blurring the lines between political critique and hate speech. At the same time, this boundary is a delicate and challenging one to define (see our own definition in the online supplement). According to the JDA (2021), for example, some of the units of coding identified as antisemitic Israel debate in the current study, would not qualify as antisemitic (e.g., many of the units we coded as "defamation of Israel", "apartheid state accusations", and "calls for boycotts"). By deliberately coding these units as "potentially antisemitic", however, we demonstrate how a large proportion of discourse on Israel is highly contentious and serves as a flashpoint for deep societal and political divisions. In addition, our findings reveal that Israel-related forms of antisemitism are often blatant (supporting H1), i.e. communicated explicitly through perpetrator-victim reversals in reference to the Holocaust ("6 million and 24 thousands + many more to come"), violent *demonization* ("Israhell"; "Apartheid-state", "terrorist colonizer state Israel", "the Zionist devil") and *dehumanizing* language ("Zionists are rats") that insult and threaten the target, often denoted as "Zionists" and "Israel" (Schwarz-Friesel, 2019, p. 50; see also Becker, 2021). These explicit forms are so deeply normalized and accepted that it takes conscious analysis to flag them (Rosenfeld, 2018)[9]. Our operationalization of such expressions as potentially antisemitic is guided by the discourse analytical (Becker, 2021; Markl, 2018; Schwarz-Friesel, 2019) and educational (Bernstein, 2018; Killguss et al., 2020) literature on the topic, but is not one that creates agreement. Our work aligns with research showing that normalizing Israel-related antisemitism risks conflating Jewish identity with Israeli state actions, threatening intergroup relations among emerging adults (Bernstein, 2018). In addition, our data show that such expressions are vastly socially amplified (see our *social production* argument above), contributing to the formation of alliances of ingroups versus outgroups. Addressing this issue requires greater public awareness and education, specifically to distinguish

[9] In fact, classifying these as "potentially antisemitic" is misleading, as these expressions often contain highly explicit hateful language. See footnote 6, for a discussion of our choice of the term "potential".

legitimate political advocacy from harmful hate speech (Odağ et al., 2024; Bernstein, 2018; Killguss et al., 2020).

The frequent and often implicit references to the Holocaust and Nazi Germany in our data reveal another alarming pattern. Arguments trivializing the Holocaust or framing it as a narrative to "move past" (e.g., *Schlussstrich* rhetoric) serve to erode the collective memory of historical atrocities (referred to as *secondary antisemitism*; Bernstein, 2018)[10]. Similarly, drawing false parallels between the Holocaust and contemporary events diminishes the singular nature of the Shoah, while Holocaust denial perpetuates dangerous revisionist histories. Coupled with the invocation of the term "Antisemitismuskeule" to deflect accusations of antisemitism, these often-implicit arguments (supporting H3) seek to shield hateful rhetoric from scrutiny (Grimm & Kahmann, 2018). Equally disturbing are the recurring conspiracy theories and dehumanizing stereotypes about Jewish people, laying the groundwork for exclusionary and violent attitudes (Bernstein, 2018; Haas, 2012; Schwarz-Friesel & Reinharz, 2013). The portrayal of Jewish individuals as controlling global systems or ascribing them subhuman characteristics reflects a blend of age-old antisemitic tropes with modern digital hate.

The spread and shapes of antisemitism that emerging adults have easy access to constitute a much-needed avenue for research on media competences (i.e., longer-term goals of the present work: https://www.respond-training.de/). Our study contributes to such efforts along at least two pathways: (1) Antisemitism is often embedded in political discourse, especially in the context of Israel and Palestine. This highlights the importance of teaching emerging adults how to differentiate between legitimate political criticism and harmful generalizations that cross into antisemitism – a difficult line to draw. In fact, the contention that a speech act "is not antisemitism but Israel critique" is a highly frequent argument propelling the production of potentially antisemitic discourse online. But there are hardly any guidelines for emerging adults to differentiate between legitimate and antisemitic critique (but see Schwarz-Friesel, 2020). The current study offers an operationalization of this difference, which could be taken up by educational efforts. (2) With a significant portion of potentially antisemitic content expressed implicitly, and often through subtle tactics like confirming comments or coded symbols, education must also go beyond simply identifying overt hate speech. Emerging adults need to be equipped with the skills to critically assess these more veiled forms of hate through a contextual understanding.

Limitations, Strengths, and Future Research

The study has several limitations that inform future research. The sample size (N = 47) limits generalizability, though the data-intensive design is unique, based on analyses of over 1,000 social media threads. Recruitment relied on convenience sampling and mostly included university students who self-selected into the study (Hofhues et al., 2020). Since higher education is associated with lower antisemitic attitudes, especially in countries that condemn antisemitism and Holocaust denial (Nyhan et al., 2024; though see Avni & Samuel, 2025, for a different situation on US campuses), our sample may be more positively oriented toward Judaism compared to groups with lower education or in contexts where antisemitism is less stigmatized. Future studies should recruit participants with more varied educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, as SES influences social media use and risks (Skogen et al., 2022; Vogels, 2021). Such variation would help design interventions tailored to different vulnerabilities.

The German context also shapes our findings, as debates on antisemitism here are strongly influenced by the Holocaust and subsequent political culture (Grimm & Kahmann, 2018). Because histories and discourses vary across countries, comparative studies could show how context influences what emerging adults attend to. Finally, our data reflect what participants perceived and chose to share, meaning that a different sample or method (e.g., tracking instead of self-report) might yield different results. Self-reports may also underestimate antisemitism, particularly implicit forms that participants do not recognize due to limited knowledge of stereotypes or history. Thus, unnoticed content is also unreported in the media diaries. Nonetheless, careful documentation ensures that the data are valid for our sample and its associated demographics.

We also see our method as a strength for several reasons. First, it prioritizes user perspectives: from a participatory and social constructivist view, it is crucial to see what young people themselves attend to in media posts. It should be noted again here that the bulk of our data came from non-Jews, exposing how much "Jewish content" they are receiving in their personalized feeds. The data are grounded in participants' own understandings of Judaism and reflect the platforms they actually use, allowing "high autonomy" and foregrounding subjective realities (Wagner et al., 2022). Second, because feeds are personalized and no two users see the same content (Eg et al., 2023), our approach captures idiographic experiences, which are increasingly

[10] Once more, classifying these as "potentially" antisemitic is inappropriate as these expressions are clearly antisemitic. See our reflection of the term "potential" in footnote 6.

important in complex and individualized media environments (Wagner et al., 2022). Third, the method reduces bias: subtle antisemitism is often uncertain and easily overlooked, and asking participants to only collect postings that they deemed antisemitic would have yielded a narrower sample. By including young adults who were not experts in antisemitism, we found that antisemitic content emerged even without prompting, underscoring its everyday prevalence. However, this strength is tempered by a likely limitation: several weeks of participant engagement may have triggered algorithmic amplification, potentially increasing the exposure to such content over time.

A strength of the study lies in its timing: data were collected from February to May 2022, prior to the Hamas terrorist attacks of October 7, 2023. This allows the study to provide a unique baseline of how emerging adults in Germany encountered antisemitism on social media in a period unaffected by the exacerbation of the Middle East Conflict beginning on October 7. Our findings, therefore, offer valuable insights into manifestations of antisemitism in a comparatively "pre-crisis" context, against which future research can examine potential changes in frequency and form. Our approach underscores that these worrying trends have existed for much longer.

Conclusion

This study offers valuable insights into the prevalence and nature of antisemitism on the social media of emerging adults, highlighting the need for educational efforts targeting this age group. By examining both macro- and micro-level online discourse, the research reveals the normalization of Israel-related antisemitism and shows that, across any reasonable categorization, implicit antisemitism constitutes a significant proportion of what young adults encounter and is particularly difficult to detect. Our findings emphasize the importance of educating young people to critically engage with online content and recognize harmful narratives to prevent the spread of antisemitism. Our findings also highlight the need to consider the distinct effects of such content on Jewish and non-Jewish audiences, as both encounter it in their daily media environments, but under very different conditions of vulnerability.

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Publication Ethics
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Open Science
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