How we use social media: Strategies of Instagram use

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Social media use is a highly relevant everyday practice with important individual and social consequences. In addition to analyses of such outcomes or of the content recipients are exposed to, *how* we use social media is an important object of study in itself and an important intervening factor in many processes of communication. Drawing on the theoretical framework of strategies of media use, this study investigates social media use as a strategic practice. Based on qualitative interviews with Instagram users, we identify different elements of strategies and reconstruct their practical sense. For example, social media use can be the simplest way to pass time and can be useful or "inspiring" in different ways. Styles of use can be straightforward or meandering, controlled or automatic. We find distanced or emotionally involved, critical or self-critical attitudes, and the world as represented on Instagram can be experienced as fake, aesthetic, or authentic.

Is social media use good for you? Do you spend too much time on Instagram? Do your kids? Does social media use lead to believing misinformation or to the adoption of gender stereotypes or problematic body images? These are legitimate questions, but they can be met with at least two possible qualifying responses: It may not be the time spent on social media that is consequential, but rather 1. the content being consumed, and 2. how social media is used.

This study focuses on the second aspect: the *how* of social media use, the *form* of practices of media use in terms of styles of acting, invested resources, inner attitudes, or modalities of interpretation (to summarize the main dimensions of the theoretical approach used in the study, see below), as opposed to the *who, what, when, how long,* and *with what effect* or *with what interpretation and appropriation* of media use. For the time being, we consider this *how* as an object of study in and of itself, distinct from the analysis of consequences of social media use, thematic interests, or media content, or the study of broader, e.g., political-economic, contexts. Following this approach, we will focus on Instagram as one exemplary platform.

The research gap addressed by this study may not be immediately obvious, given the vast literature on social media use. To illustrate the specific level of analysis in this study, consider the possible observations that someone uses Instagram for 1.5 hours per day, has established a parasocial relationship with several influencers focusing on knitting, with certain consequences for their wellbeing, etc. Social media use is thus described with regard to its duration, certain thematic interests, and specific phenomena of reception and consequences (PSR and wellbeing). In contrast, this study would be interested in how that person has initiated a specific episode of Instagram use (or how they

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typically do), for example habitually as part of a morning ritual, in what kind of attitude the user takes toward different posts, for example an attitude of heightened emotional involvement, etc. Furthermore, such features of media use are not analyzed in isolation, but an episode or typical practices are studied systematically along a larger number of dimensions that describe an overall formal strategy of media use, its social context, and the underlying resources. In our study, we are interested in the range of elements of such strategies.

Future studies may investigate how social media are used as an important intervening factor in many processes of communication, for example when it comes to entertainment, social relationships, socialization, wellbeing and health, political information, etc. For example, the same type of content may have very different consequences for wellbeing or gendered socialization depending on the attitude of belief or critical distance toward the messages. Or the same amount of screentime may be perceived as normal and pleasurable or useless and burdening, depending on the style of use, for example a very habitualized or deliberate one. But regardless of the potential consequences, the conceptualization and empirical analysis of how social media are used is a contribution to the study of media use and reception in general and, perhaps most importantly, adds another level of analysis to our understanding of an important everyday practice and of the role media use plays in social distinction and the reproduction of social inequality. For example, different ways of using social media are either socially valued or stigmatized not only based on the content but also the process as such (Krämer, 2013b). They can be viewed as either deliberate, controlled, mindful, critical, useful, or indiscriminate, uncritical, a waste of time, or even pathological. Understanding the way media are actually used in different contexts may contribute to the critical reflection of both the practices and the judgmental and distinctive discourses about them.

The present study is based on the theoretical framework of *strategies of media use* (Krämer, 2013b). It aims to describe media practices comprehensively and thus capture the many dimensions of how media are used, going beyond single concepts (such as habitualization, narrative transportation, para-social interaction, social comparison, etc.) or dichotomies and continuums (such as heuristic versus systematic, hedonistic versus eudaimonic use, etc.). It integrates previous conceptions of styles of media use, modes or modalities of reception, media repertoires and habits, etc. (for an overview, see Frey and Krämer, 2020a) with the assumptions of sociological theories of practice.

Until now the framework has only been applied to receptive media use and television in particular (Krämer, 2020b). The obvious next steps are to adapt it to other types of media and productive use, i.e., active messaging, posting, or other similar interactions. This study takes a first step by analyzing strategies of *receptive* social media use, exploring their elements and overall structure by means of qualitative interviews with Instagram users. Users can decide to like a post or drop a short comment in a matter of (split) seconds. Thus, receptive social media use cannot always be strictly separated from active communication (e.g., Bruns, 2008). However, both types can be distinguished analytically and must be described separately regarding how users proceed (e.g., how a comment is written as opposed to how someone chooses which comments to read). Furthermore, many episodes of social media use only involve selective and receptive behavior. To reduce the complexity of a first exploratory analysis, it is convenient to focus on these aspects.

Strategies of Media Use

The theoretical framework of strategies of media use (Krämer, 2013a; 2013b) describes media practices as those that people use to affect (i.e., stabilize or change) their conscious experience and their views of different worlds (i.e., their feelings and thoughts, their knowledge and judgments, etc. with regard to reality, fictional worlds, etc.). To this end, users relate to their environment and to mediated worlds in specific ways: adapted to the situation and with given resources, (at least implicitly) directed towards certain goals or according to certain criteria of evaluation, with different formal patterns of decision-making and sense-making, and with different modifications of attention and attitudes of consciousness (whose conceptualization is inspired by phenomenology and phenomenological sociology, Schütz, 1945; Weiß, 2005).

The theory of strategies of media use consists of two main components: 1. assumptions derived from theories of practice, and 2. the dimensions of strategies. The first component explains the choice of strategy with its social implications and the second characterizes the various dimensions on which concrete strategies can be described. Users choose among different potential elements for each dimension, which together form their strategy in a given situation.

From the perspective of Bourdieu's (1972) theory of practice (see also Bourdieu, 1973, 1980; and for another application to media use see Weiß, 2020), media use…

- … is not analyzed best as clear-cut, rationally calculated, and consciously preplanned acts, but as an ongoing embodied activity that follows a "practical sense" based on implicit, transferable, and continuously adapted *generative schemata*.
- … does not only respond to general needs but practices of media use are also chosen with regard to *evaluative schemata* that are specific to people's social situation and socialization. The practical sense is also a sense of what is possible, necessary, worthwhile, fun, or valuable, depending on their habitus and current priorities.
- … is not only about preferences for certain types of content, such as a taste for different media genres, but also about the *ways* cultural goods are *approached* and cultural practices *performed*; e.g., as disinterested contemplation or emotional identity work.
- … has implications beyond the immediate situation and is related to *social inequality*. Some strategies can lead to long-term benefits, in particular the accumulation of resources in the form of cultural, social, and sometimes economic capital. Others mainly serve recreational goals or may even be creative or subversive but without lasting symbolic gains (they may then be called "tactical" as opposed to "strategic" practices in the narrow sense; see de Certeau, 1990). This differential reach of strategies of media use depends on embodied and other resources and the strategies thus contribute to the reproduction of social inequality.

In addition to these general considerations, strategies of media use can then be described along at least ten dimensions (see Table 1 for an overview based on Krämer, 2013a) that can be grouped into three categories:

1. Dimensions related to resources: These define which valuable artifacts and competences are invested and accumulated mostly without explicit consideration (the *stakes* and *profits*), and what resources, such as time and money (Scherer & Naab, 2009), and positive and negative

consequences enter the subjective calculations during the choice of strategies (the *costs* and *uses and gratifications*).

2. Formal dimensions: Along these dimensions, users choose different ways of approaching media devices, channels, platforms, applications, content, etc., based on different *repertoires* (Hasebrink & Popp, 2006) and on different *styles* that determine how users initiate and terminate episodes of media use and how they makes choices, navigate, and process information (e.g., exhaustively versus selectively) (see, e.g., Schweiger, 2005, on styles of media use; and Bilandzic, 2005, who uses the label "strategies" for similar features of media selection). In the present approach, habitualization and ritualization is also included in the dimension of styles (see Koch, 2010; LaRose, 2010, Naab, 2013). Furthermore, users *arrange* their and others' bodies and objects in relation to each other and to given spaces.

3. Dimensions concerning mental dispositions: Users also adapt to the situation and content by ascribing a specific ontological status to mediated worlds (the *modality*, e.g., factual, fictive, satirical), by controlling the way they relate to those worlds (the *attitude*, e.g., relaxed, distanced, critical, ironic), and by *focusing* their attention on different aspects (e.g., the mediated world with its objects or characters, the formal features of content, the own self etc.). This conceptualization of dispositions takes up the elements of earlier typologies (e.g., Frey, 2017, 2018; Liebes & Katz, 1986; Michelle, 2007; Scherer, Baumann, & Schlütz, 2005; Suckfüll, 2004; Weiß, 2005; Woelke & Paus-Hasebrink, 2005), distinguishes the three dimensions of modality, focus, and attitudes, and complements the elements on each dimension where necessary.

Taken together, the elements chosen on these ten dimensions constitute the overall strategies users employ in a given situation. This combination is not necessarily unique to each situation but can follow an existing mental script representing a strategy that has been developed or learned earlier, either applying it as is or with adaptions (Krämer, 2013a; Suckfüll & Scharkow, 2009).

Table 1: Definition of the dimensions of strategies of media use

Dimension	Definition
Stakes	Resources that are invested (not necessarily consciously) into media use
Profits	Long-term positive outcomes of media use, in particular accumulation of capital of different forms
Uses and gratifications	Positive consequences of media use that are (explicitly or implicitly) sought and experienced
Costs	Monetary and other resources that enter (consciously or implicitly) into the consideration of media use
Repertoire	Category structure on which the selection process is based, including alternative options considered
Arrangement	Schemata on how to locate/arrange objects and bodies during media use
Style	Forms of acting or thinking that form recurring patterns in the interaction with the environment and in the processing of experiences

Modality	Ontological status (real, fictional, etc.) the user confers to the worlds as represented in media content
Attitude	The user's relationship to the world(s) as represented in media content and the degree and form of control over this relationship (e.g., belief/disbelief, regulation of emotions and evaluations, ironic attitude, etc.)
Focus	Elements of the medially represented or extramedial worlds the user's attention is allocated to

In contrast to other applications of practice theory to (social) media use, the framework is only moderately holistic (see also Krämer and Frey, 2019, on holistic versus reductionist conceptualizations of practices of media use). For example, Couldry's (2012) typology of practices of social media use and similar conceptions postulate a fixed number of overall types with a specific practical sense—such as "presencing" as the practice of keeping oneself publicly present—that combine categories of applications, content, and activities while neglecting other aspects and focusing on the overall sense of the practice. The strategies of media use framework systematically describes practices along a larger number of dimensions. While it is also supposed that strategies make practical sense, it is not assumed that, by default, specific combinations of aspects of practices are uniquely meaningful or useful to people but that different combinations can make sense in different contexts. Thus, the selected framework forces us to describe practices systematically and bottom-up along a number of dimensions. By analyzing practices along the categories of the approach (while remaining open to revising them), we aim to be more systematic and open than by categorizing them into overall types that are postulated top-down or by selectively focusing on certain aspects.

To quickly contextualize the approach of strategies of media use in relation to traditions and current concerns in media use and reception research, we can refer to the discussion by Krämer and Frey (2020, with further references) who compare it to other schools and trace back its historical roots. Interpretive and critical approaches and research in the tradition of cultural studies often focus on the *results* of appropriation and interpretation of media texts by users, i.e., their reading of the content, often in relation to dominant ideologies and discourses. Research on strategies of media use focuses on the *process* of sensemaking and the social and situational context (that is also investigated by ethnographic research). The strategies of media use approach provides an elaborate conceptual structure for such an analysis and allows for very differentiated studies relying on the above dimensions.

Phenomenological approaches to media use focus on the basic structures of subjective experiences, however emphasizing the universal features instead of a differential and contextual approach.

Finally, research in the tradition of uses and gratifications or selective exposure research identifies types of motives for media use or avoidance and is often paradigmatically related to effects research, but often lacks an elaborate conceptualization of the form of practices and experiences.

Krämer and Frey (2020) also point to other intellectual sources of research on modalities, styles, repertoires, and strategies of media use beyond Bourdieuian theory of practice and cultural sociology and phenomenological sociology, such as reader response criticism, interpretive sociology, and theories of action, and research on media use and reception in these traditions.

Elsewhere, we will also further elaborate on how the approach can be used to address recent concerns with regard to social media use, such as (dis-)belief in messages (in particular with regard to

disinformation), social media use and wellbeing, or online discussions (in particular with regard to deliberation or hostility) (Krämer & Langmann, in prep.). We argue that in these cases, the consequences of receptive or productive social media use cannot only be explained by preexisting attitudes, the content as such, or the mere dose of exposure, but probably also by the features of the practices of social media use themselves as theorized in the strategies of media use approach.

Strategies of Online Use

So far, the framework of strategies of media use has neither been systematically applied to (consumptive or productive) online use (only Krämer, 2020a, pp. 90ff., shortly hints to its applications), nor have previous studies described the aspects that the approach is interested in as comprehensively as the framework would allow and require. Nevertheless, many previous conceptualizations and findings with regard to social media use, but mostly with regard to other forms of online use can be mapped onto the dimensions of strategies and phrased in their terms. Therefore, it might seem odd that, in the following, we only review very few studies from the large body of literature on social media use, its specific determinants, contexts, consequences, etc. However, we have to limit ourselves to analyses that match our interest as closely as possible, i.e., studies on the differences in practices similar to the ones described by the strategies of media use framework, on the "how" of social media use or online use in general.

Studies on the *uses and gratifications* of social media use (Quan-Haase & Young, 2014) cover aspects of the logic of the practical sense but not the whole range of evaluative schemata that users may rely on in order to judge different potential practices.

A number of studies have applied Bourdieu's conceptualization of social space, habitus, and *practical sense* to internet use, but without linking it to specific strategies in the sense of the strategies of media use framework (see Ignatow & Robinson, 2017, for a review of such studies or, e.g., Leguina & Downey, 2021, who conceptualize "strategies" as the use of different sources while seeking for information on everyday topics). Nevertheless, such studies demonstrate that online and social media use is related to different dimensions of social inequality and that different types of *generative* and *evaluative schemata*, *costs, stakes*, and *profits* are involved in such practices.

Research that can be related to the dimension of *arrangement* has investigated selected types of situations that are theoretically and socially relevant in changing media environments and practices, such as mobile use (e.g., Karnowski, 2020) or multi-screen use (e.g., Hasebrink & Siebenaler, 2020), but has not necessarily explored the whole range of potential circumstances and orderings. Like many studies in the tradition of domestication theory (but also referring to de Certeau, phenomenological sociology, and other approaches), the ethnographic study by Bakardjieva (2005) already brings together many characteristics of practices of online use that would be characterized as aspects of arrangements and explores the practical sense of everyday online use.

More recent research on media *repertoires* has, of course, included or focused on social media (e.g., Merten, 2020). However, this dimension is less relevant here because, as a first step in the study of overall strategies, the present study focuses on a single platform in order to reduce complexity.

With regard to *styles* of navigation and selection, various studies have distinguished different ways of using search engines (e.g., Wirth, Böcking, Karnowski, & von Pape, 2007) or browsing the web (e.g., Doedens, 2010; Graff, 2010). However, studies on how users select content on social media, often restricted to journalistic news, seem to focus more on cues and personal characteristics (e.g.,

Karnowski, Kümpel, Leonhard, & Leiner, 2017; Ohme & Mothes, 2020) instead of different formal approaches to the practice (however, see, e.g., Wieland & Kleinen-von Königslöw, 2020, for the distinction between an automatic, incidental, and active mode or pathway of selection and processing). When scrolling through a feed on a social media platform, users have to quickly identify a *modality* for each post or for its parts; for example, whether a statement is meant as realistic, fictional, satirical, hyperbolic, etc. Researchers have often chosen a rather selective and normative approach to such decisions when they have investigated whether specific types of messages (such as native advertisement, "fake news" etc.) are recognized correctly (e.g., Marks, Grimm, & Campbell, 2019; Pennycook & Rand, 2021). Others have analyzed performances and perceptions of authenticity on social media. Even a nuanced, constructivist, and thus non-normative analysis along this concept (see, e.g., Maares, Banjac, & Hanusch, 2021) can be complemented by an approach that draws attention to different modalities. We can then analyze how users perceive content to be related to different worlds in different ways (e.g., a stylized version of reality, a staged performance etc.), not just judge its "realness."

In the context of the framework of strategies of media use, such decisions between modalities are investigated openly and as a precondition for further strategical choices: depending on the modality that users generally expect on a platform or on the perceived modality of a concrete message, they adapt their *attitude* and other elements of their strategies. For example, they are immersed or transported into the mediated world, keep a critical distance towards a post's claims, or engage in counter-arguing regarding some position or reasoning, remain emotionally detached, etc. Both in the case of modalities and attitudes, the range of potential choices during social media use remains to be explored.

Literature that speaks to the *focus* of attention during the use of online media is also very fragmented. Certain aspects, such as a focus on the self in comparison to others have been studied extensively (Verduyn, Gugushvili, Massar, Täht, & Kross, 2020) and users' focus in a strictly visual understanding has been investigated based on eye-tracking (e.g., Vergara, Siles, Castro, & Chaves, 2021). However, the range of potential aspects users may focus on, from formal features of messages to various aspects of the users' life, social relationships, etc., has not been explored in single studies or within a single comprehensive theoretical framework.

Despite the examples cited above and similar studies, previous research on online news seems highly fragmented, focuses on different types of platforms, applications, and content, and has partly been conducted before the rise of today's social media. It seems therefore relevant to address the following research questions:

> RQ1: How (well) can social media use be described in terms of the dimensions postulated in the theory of strategies of media use?
> RQ2: What are the elements of strategies users choose when pursuing their practices of social media use and what is the overall structure and practical sense of the strategies?

Answering these questions, the strategies of media use approach is both validated, i.e., its potential for the analysis of social media use assessed, and specified, i.e., the theoretical dimensions filled with specific elements.

In the present study, the use of Instagram in Germany, where it was the social networking application with the most daily users in early 2020 (Beisch & Schäfer, 2020), is analyzed as an example. We do

not focus on the specific functionalities and cultural or gendered connotations of Instagram, but on the features that make it a typical example of a broader category of social media or social networking sites (Ellison & boyd, 2013), for example the potential for vastly different arrangements of use (due to the existence of apps for mobile devices; Humphreys, 2013), for different styles of navigation (due to the existence of one or more feeds generated for the user and connected to accounts with their own specific feeds and interconnections), or for user-centered reception versus other focus (due to the accounts often being related to individual persons). To review research on the use of Instagram (or even to integrate the specific productive, technical, cultural, or political-economical side of the platform into the framework) in its breadth is beyond the scope of this section. We can only note that the research landscape is highly fragmented, with the role of influencers, visual self-representation (often in relations to gender and/or body images), and health or wellbeing as some of the main concerns (for reviews, see, e.g., Faelens et al., 2021; Rejeb, Rejeb, Abdollahi, & Treiblmaier, 2022, with references to further reviews; Vandenbosch, Fardouly & Tiggemann, 2022; Vrontis, Makrides, Christofi, & Thrassou, 2021). However, studies rarely rely on a holistic conceptualization of practices of use, but often approach their object of study according to the specific social or individual problems, practices, or effects, according to specific topics of content (such as beauty, food, tourism, politics etc.), and according to specific research traditions (such as the cultural studies, interpretive, ethnographic and critical as well as the selective exposure and media effects approaches discussed above in relation to the strategies of media use framework). This research landscape leaves a lot of space for systematic and more holistic analyses of practices as suggested by the strategies of media use approach.

Method

We know relatively little about social media use from a perspective of strategies of media use but can rely on a general theoretical framework that has been fruitfully applied to other forms of media use before. This state of affairs calls for a specific type of qualitative research design (in the present case, a design in the tradition of qualitative text or content analysis, see e.g., Kuckartz, 2014) with a combination of a theoretically informed category-based and case-based logic. The analysis was guided by the preliminary categories provided by the theoretical framework (the dimensions of strategies) that were then specified (identifying elements of strategies and possibly typical combinations thereof with their overall practical sense) and open to revision (possibly adding new dimensions of changing the conceptualization of existing ones). Furthermore, relations across categories (the structure and sense of strategies across their individual elements) and similarities and differences (similar or varying strategies across users) were identified.

No single method of data collection is suited to analyze all aspects of strategies of media equally validly and reliably. Due to their character as embodied practice involving certain mental attitudes and with social-structural implications, a combination of methods would be ideal: observations and possibly technical measurements, introspective or phenomenological methods, and correlative or biographical analyses of the social-structural aspects (Frey and Krämer, 2020b; Krämer and Frey, 2019). However, for many purposes, self-reports can be an adequate and more feasible method to study the overall structure of strategies (for a discussion, see Woelke, 2005), while each of the above methods can only capture specific aspects of strategies. Before future studies possibly deploy the

whole ranges of methods, it seems therefore advisable to explore strategies based on the best approach to their overall structure, i.e., self-reports.

Thus, in the present study, elements of strategies of receptive Instagram use were collected and their relationships were explored based on ten semi-structured, qualitative interviews (conducted from February to March 2021). Users were asked to describe their typical ways of using the platform, but also to recount the most recent situation in which they used Instagram in a fairly typical way. This part of the interviews was inspired by the method of *elicitation* or *micro-phenomenological interviews*, in which participants are guided to evoke detailed memories of a concrete recent experience and to verbalize it as precisely as possible, leaving aside all generalizations and judgments in favor of *how* the experience happened and to what the consciousness was directed (Petitmengin, 2006). However, for the present exploratory purpose, it was not yet necessary to follow this highly elaborate methodology in all its complexity.[2] Further studies may then engage in even more sophisticated phenomenological analysis in order to describe the attitudes and experiences during reception in more detail.

However, following the micro-phenomenological approach, interviewees were instructed to remember the exact situation "as if they were there," with their posture, sensory impressions, and feelings, and to report their activities chronologically in the present tense:

> Interviewer: "Can you describe this situation as if you were there? I mean in the present tense […]. What do you see, what do you hear?"
> Ada: "Yes. So I sit at my study desk and around me there's my laptop and pens and a glass of water and a bouquet of tulips […]. So I am eating my muesli and listening to music and then I am opening my hand and I am looking on Instagram what new stories there are […]."

The mode of elicitation and the fact that very recent episodes were described (from the same day or the day before) ensures that the narratives were as detailed and faithful as possible. However, we still watched out for verbal and nonverbal signs of socially desirable representations—in particular with regard to the typical appreciation or stigmatization of certain types of media use—and indications that interviewees were not sufficiently projecting themselves into specific situations.

After an initial response to these general prompts, subsequent questions focused on different steps of the typical and concrete episode (from its initiation to its end) and on the various dimensions of strategies. The interview guide was adapted several times based on a preliminary analysis of the transcripts of the subsequent interviews.

Both during the interviews and the analysis, care was taken not to focus on generalizations about the platform or on normative judgments about social media use, but rather on users' recent and typical practices and to direct the respondent back to them if they digressed.

Participants were ten female German Instagram users aged 20 to 29 years (a somewhat narrow range that, however, is part of the age group in the German population with the highest share of Instagram users; Koch, 2022) with a diverse sociodemographic background including, for example, a midwife trainee, students of various disciplines, an architect, and a restaurant manager (Table 2 provides a

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[2] For example, it is suggested to have participants practice the right attitude toward one's experiences using a simpler task, to strictly redirect their attention to the situation in question, or to instruct them to use gestures or verbal placeholders for aspects that are hard to verbalize. In comparison to these suggestions, our interviews were somewhat closer to conventional semi-structured interviews in order not to over-complicate the task for both sides and because our research interest was not purely phenomenological but also about arrangements and typical instead of specific practices.

more detailed overview of the sample). They were interviewed in February and March 2021 and recruited via distant social connections and with the aim to maximize diversity with regard to theoretically relevant differences in social milieus, life experiences, and thus potentially their strategies of social media use. The participants gave their informed consent to participate in the study and were not rewarded for their participation.

The study focused on women because, in addition to the strategies of media use that were investigated explicitly and in depth for each interviewee, their relationship with women's wellbeing was analyzed. However, we will subsequently focus on the strategies themselves and are confident that, despite the rather small and exclusively female sample of this exploratory study, we did not miss important elements and can identify a number of the most relevant types of strategies. We assume that potential gender differences will probably concern the relative quantitative distribution of strategies that are, however, based on a diverse but ultimately limited set of elements that can mostly be identified in our analysis. Furthermore, as formal elements of strategies will probably be related to gender less strongly than, for example, certain thematic interests in terms of content, our study is likely to capture the most important aspects of strategies. Of course, future studies should explore strategies of social media in broader samples that not only allow for a first identification of elements and structures of strategies but for a more in-depth analysis of variations and how strategies are connected to different social groups and situations.

Half of the respondent use Instagram for purely private purposes, while the others work in marketing or related fields and therefore also use the app professionally or, like four of the respondents, are (aspiring) influencers with a larger number of followers (up to 14,500) and a certain commercial interest in the platform. The daily duration of Instagram use varies widely, ranging from 45 minutes to almost six hours (with an average of about 2,5 hours). The interviewees follow between 200 and 700 accounts.

Table 2: Participants of the study (in chronological order of the interviews)

Alias	Age	College education (ongoing or completed)	Profession	Profession related to marketing	Followers
Ada	26	Yes	Student (media design), student employee (marketing)	Yes	400
Elodie	26	Yes	Student (health economics)	No	600
Emma	28	No	Restaurant manager	No	400
Alisa	23	Yes	Student (education)	Yes	14,500
Marlen	29	Yes	Architect	No	300
Fiona	25	No	Manager of a cooking website	Yes	900 (private), 4800 (business)

Coralie	24	No	Midwife trainee	No	300
Greta	21	No	Foreign correspondent trainee	No	700
Lotta	26	Yes	Student (e-commerce) and student employee (marketing), model	Yes	2,700
Kathi	29	No	Manager (online coaching)	Yes	4,800

The interviews took an average of one hour, were recorded on video with the informed consent of the participants, and the results will be presented in anonymized form. Transcripts were analyzed by the authors, roughly categorizing elements of strategies according to the theoretical dimensions, but most importantly creating increasingly refined categories of elements of strategies, carefully considering whether the elements fit the preestablished structure and clarifying potential ambiguities. While it was not deemed necessary to modify the theoretical dimensions, many nuanced distinctions between elements were made in the process. Furthermore, in an additional step of pattern and axial coding (Saldaña, 2016), typical combinations of elements and their practical sense were established.

Results

We will present our results according to groups of dimensions from the strategies of media use approach: dimensions related to resources (gratifications and costs, investments and profits, together with findings on the practical sense of practices), formal features of the practices (arrangements, repertoires, and styles), and users' mental relationship with content (modalities, attitudes, and focus).

Resources and the Practical Sense

Subjectively, the respondents do not seem to invest many resources into their Instagram use, nor do they seem to get a lot out of it. They do not reflect on the material and situational preconditions or the competences they need to use the app—everything is already there and using Instagram seems automatic and effortless (see below). Thus, the only resource that easily comes to mind is time, and episodes that consume a lot of it then entail emotional costs: sadness (Ada), guilt (Coralie), or anger (Alisa).

Users can feel that using Instagram is "somehow without much sense" (Alisa). However, it makes a lot of sense to them at another level, because it is the least demanding and an at least somewhat satisfying thing to do in many contexts—an often very habitual decision based on a sense of what is possible within the limits of the situation and of the effort one is prepared to make. Furthermore, how the respondents use the app and deliberate on this can be interpreted as a reflection of their practical sense in two ways. First, their sometimes strong, negative feelings express their powerful schemata

of evaluation, their idea of what is worthwhile, the "real" good life (or at least what is not), and what makes them a good or better person, such as by not comparing themselves to that "unreal" world.

Second, the participants are aware of certain ways in which using Instagram can be satisfying, helpful, or even profitable. It helps them "to come down, calm down, relax" (Emma), "to be up to date" (Ada), to keep in touch with friends, and is simply entertaining. However, users with this short-term, "tactical," reproductive, and often somewhat remorseful use feel that is does not "get [them] anywhere or broaden [their] horizon" (Elodie). However, what they often call "inspiration" is a search for potential leisure and crafting activities, recipes, fashion trends, workouts, etc. that improve day-to-day life or lead to stylistic choices that may convey a certain respectability or fashionableness, but probably not necessarily greater social distinction.

In addition to these mostly tactical types of social media use, there are more strategic uses: when "inspiration" becomes "personal education" (Coralie) and accumulation of cultural resources, or market orientation.

Some respondents acquire knowledge, a sense of lasting eudaimonia, and as sense of distinction in comparison to those who only follow the most commercialized accounts instead of more meaningful, informative, or political content:

> "I have also followed many *Sinnfluencer* [a German-English portmanteau of "Sinn" (i.e., sense, meaning) and "influencer," referring to online creators that focus on supposedly more healthy and sustainable consumption or on meaningful lifestyles, politics, spirituality, etc. in general], so I have followed fewer people who endlessly promote some brands, but people who have provided meaningful content and talked critically about topics. About feminism and equal rights, the environment, those topics. This is why it has also been a point of personal education that I have hoped for, by means of other people's opinions. […] I think that, on a personal level, I have learned a lot." (Coralie)

The profits of such strategies are symbolic, a way of using social media and a lifestyle that are considered more legitimate, and gains in cultural capital: being informed about the right topics and being able to comment on certain issues in a sufficiently sophisticated manner. At the same time, such usage requires certain incorporated resources the users are not necessarily aware of, but consist of the knowledge and aesthetic schemata necessary to identify relevant accounts and make sense of their posts.

The other type of strategic use seeks "inspiration" on economic and professional success strategies. The respondents who are, or aspire to be, influencers or work in a field related to social media or marketing look for trends, potential collaborations, and images to train their photographic skills and their eye for aesthetics.

Arrangements, Repertoires, and Styles

Despite the numerous differences, all respondents described one type of situation: checking Instagram in the morning in bed to see "what's new" (Lotta) and to pass some time before one is ready to get up. Before analyzing the elements of strategies on the formal dimensions (arrangements, repertoires, styles) in more detail, we will distinguish four types of episodes with their typical combinations of these elements, with the morning routine as an example of the first type:

1. The news check: Often but not exclusively in the morning, the subjectively most important and timely items in the app are checked as part of a rather fixed and time-limited routine (e.g., reading the messages before looking at selected stories on Instagram), often in combination with other channels (e.g., after checking e-mails).
2. The short diversion: At various points of the day, a short period of time has to be bridged (e.g., waiting in public, while smoking, or during a free moment at home) and has a natural limit (however, if there is no precise endpoint, users can lose themselves on the platform even though they use feeds and stories very selectively, anticipating the restricted time span). Instagram may be substituted by similar activities because the episode is not based on a particular motive other than to pass time.
3. "Berieselung": the term, literally translated as "sprinkling," is often used in the German language to refer to passive and effortless, rather indiscriminate use of (traditionally mostly audiovisual) media. Respondents use it to categorize episodes in a comfortable setting, mostly after work, on weekends, or days off, with more time to spend and potential alternative pastimes, and without a clear endpoint. Users allow themselves to check the "endless" parts of the app (such as the "reels" or the "explore" page) and surf until they are bored, tired, when their posture becomes uncomfortable, or when others seek their attention.
4. The search or research: Users have a more or less specific interest and search for certain pieces of information, instructions, or inspirations. Sometimes a type of post is expected to appear at a given time and is then located (e.g., a new weekly workout plan by a fitness influencer). The style of navigation can vary in complexity, but the approach is goal-driven and the episode usually ends when the need for information is satisfied.

Concerning the style of initiation, all interviewees report that many episodes are started habitually, in an automatic way that is often only noticed after a while. They describe this in quite mechanistic terms:

> "In the first place, I wouldn't talk about it as a decision but as a mechanism. If we really talk about this moment when I have sat down on the sofa, then there was simply this 'mechanism of boredom.'" (Coralie)

For Ada, it feels as if the phone "had pulled itself automatically into my hand." Several participants are sometimes downright surprised they find themselves on Instagram and some interrupt their use as soon as they notice.

In cases of habitual use, the situation is mostly prearranged and usually does not require further preparations. It is such that it easily allows and automatically invites the use of Instagram without much effort going into the arrangement: one is waiting at the bus stop or at a checkout counter; one is either alone during free time or with a partner to whom one has already talked quite bit that day; one is comfortably sitting on the sofa, lying in bed, or sitting at the writing desk. There's nothing more to do than taking the phone and opening the app.

Multi-screen use is usually not a single, integral, or coordinated practice, but the mostly automatic addition of one practice on top of the other: watching television becomes unsatisfactory and one eventually grabs the phone and starts scrolling through Instagram.

Only some users describe an active arrangement, with Instagram use as a leisure activity in the emphatic sense that is prepared as such. These respondents brew tea or coffee for what they know will be a longer and relaxed episode of use on the sofa, almost a "date with Instagram" (Greta). Some participants also describe how they sometimes think about what to do (watch Netflix, read a book, play a game on their smartphone) when they have free time, and opt for Instagram. However, most of the time, the app appears as part of a larger repertoire of media or activities only retrospectively, upon reflection: It is seen as a waste of time that could have been used on more worthwhile "real-life" things, or one might have used Google on a computer to find certain information (but using Instagram on the phone was more convenient).

The style of navigation and termination can be shaped by the features of the app, the situation, and by interest. As mentioned above, "research" type episodes often end when the desired information has been found, although this type can more or less easily transition into less controlled surfing, "this strange flow in which one jumps from one account to another" (Coralie). An episode that is supposed to bridge a period of time is terminated when the endpoint is reached (e.g., when the bus arrives). And some users emphasize they do not look at "everything," but only the first few posts and/or the stories by the most important friends and most interesting accounts and then lose interest or do not want to waste more time. For some, to have seen "everything" means to reach the message Instagram displayed saying that one is up to date, and they frequently close the app at that point and actively avoid looking at other "endless" features (which they only open when they feel they have a lot of time and nothing important to do). Still, for those users or during such "restricted" episodes, the path of navigation is usually more linear than when one not only "jumps" into the captions or comments but also into different accounts without necessarily returning to one of the general feeds.

Several respondents describe different technical means they use to regain control over automatic initiation and uncontrolled scrolling. They have almost all switched off notifications, sometimes predetermine the amount of time they want to spend on the app, and some even set an alarm. Some respondents have experimented with settings that restrict screen time of app use, but frequently found themselves overriding the limits. One user shifted the Instagram icon from her start screen to a folder, hoping that the extra step would prevent her from opening it unreflectedly. Finally, some respondents report that during certain episodes when they felt their time was limited, they saved links or screenshots for later occasions.

While most participants share the narrative of gaining control over the force of habit, sometimes using the technical against the human automatism or self-restraint against endless feeds and flows, we also find a number of other arrangements and styles: straightforward research, relaxed "dates," and episodes without particular stakes, but also unproblematic ends because one loses interest or because the time to be bridged has been passed.

Modalities, Attitudes, and Focus

When it comes to modalities and attitudes, we must often rely on generalizations about the platform (or the world as it appears on Instagram), about whole episodes, or about a user's typical attitude because the stances toward single posts or the changing experiences during an episode of social media use typically cannot be reconstructed with the current methodology.

Despite different nuances in their descriptions, most interviewees agreed that the world of Instagram is not exactly realist: it is "another world" (Ada), "a fictive world without any dark sides" (Marlen),

or an "entertainment world" (Elodie). However, beyond such general judgments, Coralie provides a more detailed introspective description of her attitude and summarizes the experience of several others:

> "Of course, what you see seems very real because those are real persons that present everything very much as real. That is the idea of the whole thing. That's why it appears real to me. In the next moment, when I think about it in a more reflective way […], it becomes of course clear to me that this is a certain world that is being built and that a lot of what is happening there is not like this in reality."

Other respondents also emphasized the authenticity or aesthetics of certain content without too much of a critical attitude. For example, Emma rejected the idea of influencers' posts being "fictive" because even with a million followers, they present their everyday life in a way that could be similar to hers. Describing her rather affirmative and at the same time somewhat reflective attitude towards a "surreal world", Greta sees Instagram as "a creative platform" that allows users to "express themselves" and "to always show themselves in the best way," adding: "I prefer to follow accounts with a consistent feed, that is tidy and nice, and I don't care if it did not look that way in reality."

Particularly regarding persons presenting themselves on Instagram, some users described their attitude as one of natural empathy, parasocial interaction, or even uncomfortable closeness. They reported they "of course perceive the person as a person with their personality", which they then judge morally and in terms of sympathy (Coralie). They do not feel as if they had met the persons in real life but (to their own amazement) nevertheless empathize with them in almost the same way (Kathi), or even feel "too close too quickly" to people they do not know but with whom they have something in common (Coralie).

The ontological modes and corresponding attitudes thus range between, on the one hand, a natural attitude (in phenomenological terminology, i.e., an everyday attitude that takes the existence of objects for granted) toward the iconic character of images, the authenticity of everyday situations and the social relationship towards the other and, on the other hand, a critical reflection of idealization (by selectivity, staging, filters, etc.), or affirmative aestheticism (it does not matter that something is staged if it is beautiful).

Users also described how their emotional attitudes and evaluative judgments were affected by different factors and how they actively manage them. Some characterized their general emotional attitude as "neutral" or "without emotion," and sometimes explained this with their job (e.g., Lotta, who has worked as model, drew a parallel with the professional and similarly emotionless production of photos) or that the variform and often staged photos would otherwise overwhelm them.

Critically distanced attitudes were triggered by inconsistencies (for example, with previous knowledge about a person), unfamiliar topics, unwanted content, or a generally negative mood. Some situations also required a conscious act of distancing:

> "For example, if I get this yoga content and everything looks really, really beautiful […], how they are able to do every exercise perfectly, then I start thinking: Ok, stop! I am doing yoga because I enjoy it [...]!" (Fiona)

The participants who judged content on Instagram as more realistic were also more emotionally involved, more empathetic towards other users, and reported leaving their emotions mostly uncontrolled.

Finally, some respondents reported also adapting the rigor of their aesthetic judgments:

> "When I see photos from friends and acquaintances, of course I also look at whether it is a beautiful photo, but I am not that strict. But on other pages, I pay attention to the aesthetics and I want it to be a beautiful photo, otherwise I somehow don't want to look at it." (Marlen)

The users' emotional, moral, and aesthetic attitudes expressed in the interviews were found to cover a whole range of controlledness, including attempts to regain control over emotional experiences. Some respondents preserved a professional emotional or moral neutrality or indifference toward the experiences expressed in posts or their aesthetic qualities. Some approached the content with a "natural" empathy while others (i.e., without any specific effort to control or enforce it, similar to other typical everyday situations) or left their emotionality flow particularly freely or controlled it very strictly.

Most respondents emphasize that, most of the time, they are not focused on Instagram to a degree that they would no longer notice what is happening around them (e.g., someone talking to them, the television program, or an audiobook), in particular if others are present. However, some also mention situations in which they are very much absorbed by what they are seeing and even focus intentionally and intensely on certain types of content or certain features. They direct their attention to persons, places, comments or likes, but sometimes also on formal features such as the perspective, lighting, or editing of images.

Beyond the content and its form, the focus can also shift to the self or to the poster and their intention:

> "In particular with friends that you know, but not as closely as to talk with them about their intentions, that's when you ask yourself, 'Does she have a crush and wants to present herself in a certain way?' You also notice if someone is single, if someone is taken, how much is happening there, how revealingly do they show themselves, does someone want to show that he is working out a lot or that they have somehow changed their diet?" (Fiona)

We do find many examples of social comparison (that the users sometimes found painful but that they also tried to control and reflected), but also other forms of relating to posts that do not exactly fall into that category: "inspiration," i.e., thinking whether one could imitate or buy something shown in the post, projecting oneself into a situation (e.g., a residence, a travel destination, an activity), and the reflection about opinions expressed in posts (e.g., what they imply, whether they are valid, why a person holds that opinion, what shapes one's own opinion), etc.

Discussion

This study has analyzed the practical sense and the specific practical forms of what often seems "somehow without much sense": the use of social media. It is a simple and automatic way to pass time; it is "inspiration" in the broadest sense, from everyday activities to a meaningful life; and it is the straightforward or meandering, controlled or endless, distanced or emotional, critical or self-

critical navigation and experience of fake, aesthetic, or authentic worlds—to mention the most important distinctions along the main dimensions of strategies identified in our interviews.

This study has been a first test of whether the approach of strategies of media use can be fruitfully applied to social media use (see RQ1). It might seem at odds with how theories are supposed to be related to data, but in a certain sense, we consider it fruitful to have somewhat "forced" our findings into the dimensions of the theoretical framework because it forces *us* to be systematic in our analysis of practices of media use. Ultimately, on cannot *not* see one's findings through the lens of specific concepts, even or especially in qualitative research. The question is only when this forcing become inadequate and how one approach yields more insights than others. We find the present approach to be fruitful in at least four ways when compared and related to previous research on (social) media use:

1. *Phenomenological richness* in the analysis of how social media use is experienced mentally and bodily: Instead of capturing practices in single formal concepts and moving on to their correlates (such as habitual use being favorable or detrimental to wellbeing), a wide range of aspects of practices can be analyzed in detail with regard to how users experience them subjectively. For example, habitual or ritual styles of use can be experienced emotionally as a "date" or bodily as the smartphone "sliding into the hand."

2. *Conceptual differentiation, decomposition, and recombination*: With its many dimensions, the present framework allows for a more differentiated analysis of practices. For example, if a main concern in research on social media use is with authenticity (both as performance and perception), the strategies of media use differentiates between modality and attitude and thus allows for the analysis of the mutual adaptation between perceived claims, expectations, evaluations, and resulting stances: In the eye of the user, is something meant to be authentic and in what sense, does it meet that standard, and how does one then approach such content?

Furthermore, previous concepts describing practices and experiences can be decomposed into their constituent elements and researchers can ask if other combinations of elements are possible. For example, how can doomscrolling be described along the dimensions of strategies and what happens if certain elements are changed—for example, if a distanced attitude is constantly attempted in order to mitigate the effect of negative content on one's mood, but not always achieved?

3. *Complementation*: The approach forces the researcher to not only focus on specific concepts describing a type of practice or one of several options on a given dimension, but to consider a fuller range of options. For example, we cannot only ask whether social comparison takes places during Instagram use and in what direction, but are prompted to ask: What do users do if they do not engage in social comparison or how do they actively avoid it, e.g., what focus (e.g., strictly aesthetic), modality (e.g., quasi-fictional), or attitude (e.g., distanced, non-judgmental) do they choose and what is the social sense of their practice and their experience if not to see if others are or have it better (e.g., to reflect on others' opinions)?

4. *Generalization*: Abstracting from specific topics of social media content (e.g., beauty, sports, presentation of bodies, food, tourism, politics etc.) and individual concepts for the analysis of specific practices, experiences, and modes of reception, the framework enables (or almost forces) researchers to find commonalities and differences, to generalize by selectively bracketing certain specificities and focusing on the overall form of reception.

However, in the present case, we have refrained from combining the formal types of situations (with their arrangement, repertoire, and style of initiation, navigation, and termination) with the mental dispositions and practical considerations into overall types of strategies. This is not a problematic issue with the theoretical approach but one of different possible findings on the overall structure of strategies. One extreme would be sets of elements that only function as a whole (the ritualized "date" with Instagram described by one respondent, with its specific arrangement, relaxed time management and attitude etc., comes close to this ideal type), the other being completely arbitrary combinations whose sense is to adapt to very specific circumstances and content. Most actual strategies probably range in between: certain combinations create specific experiences, have a specific sense, and remain similar across time for each user, but vary across users. However, they are also adapted to each situation within certain limits. Studies with larger samples of users and episodes, including quantitative surveys, could also reveal more subtle patterns, but a semi-holistic approach such as the one we have chosen is probably better suited to analyze a wide range strategies than frameworks that postulate holistic types of practices from the outset.

Importantly, the interviews remind us that, in line with praxeological assumptions, "strategic" practice does not mean users are always in control of the situation or of their experience. Practices often only make "tactical" use of a given situation in an agent's social position and context, and can be ways of regaining control instead of arranging everything according to a plan or instead of gaining new and durable resources. Furthermore, practices can lead to unwanted outcomes and are subject to negative normative or pathologizing judgments, such as social media users describing them as an "addiction" or "unhealthy." The relationship of strategies with mood and wellbeing definitely justifies further analyses and also prompts the development of what may be called meta-strategies: strategies that preemptively limit the range of strategies in concrete situations, such as technical restrictions of social media use or participants not following certain accounts in order to avoid upward social comparisons.

Conclusion

In the present study, the theoretical approach of strategies has been successfully applied to receptive social media use, as exemplified by Instagram use. Many elements have been identified on the dimensions postulated in the framework, although it has not been necessary to modify the dimensions in light of the findings.

Within the present methodology, it is not completely avoidable for participants to express generalizations, and their recollection of specific episodes and their ability to verbalize nuances of modifications of their experience are limited. Future studies may research concrete episodes and changing modalities, attitudes, and focuses more closely and with a combination of introspective, phenomenological, observational, and technical methods.

However, this study is a first step to comprehensively describe the "how" of one of the most important everyday practices, "that little shit" (Fiona) that nevertheless takes up a lot of time each day and that has important implications for our personal and social lives. They merit an increasingly detailed analysis. Even if research focuses on other causes, aspects, and consequences of media use, researchers should not prematurely narrow their focus to one or two dichotomies of how we use the media, but should consider the wide range of dimensions before possibly restricting themselves to a number of aspects. Additionally, they should not neglect the social judgments and internalized

schemata of evaluation in favor of the (seemingly) objectively functional and dysfunctional outcomes of media practices.

We cannot systematically discuss a possible future research program on social media use in the light of the strategies of media use approach, but can suggest a number of paths for future studies:

- to identify types of strategies across the population and across different platforms and applications (thus also including the dimension of repertoire that was not applicable in the present case) and in specific social groups (marginalized, elite, according to their professional status in relation to social media etc.),
- to (re-)analyze specific phenomena of media use and reception (such as parasocial interaction, social comparison etc.) along the dimensions of the approach (reconstructing and deconstructing them, complementing previous conceptualizations etc.),
- to include strategies of media use or specific dimensions into the analysis of antecedents and outcomes of media use (e.g., in research on social media use and wellbeing or on the reception of disinformation), and
- to theorize and analyze social media use and social judgements on media use normatively and critically along the approach (e.g., with regard to the labelling of certain styles, modalities, and attitudes of social media use as pathological, with regard to the reproduction of social inequality through social media use as implied by the dimensions of stakes and profits, or by connecting the approach to the political economy of social media platforms).

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