Empathy, Sensibility and Political Orientation: Investigating media representation

M.A. International Criminology

Universität Hamburg
DER FORSCHUNG | DER LEHRE | DER BILDUNG

ABSTRACT:

This study investigates the interplay between **political orientation**, **sensibility**, and **empathy** in shaping individuals' perceptions of **media representation**. Building on prior research linking behavioural and emotional indicators to political orientation, we explore their impact on the perception of being **wrongfully represented in media**. Through surveys and data analysis, our findings illuminate nuanced relationships, contributing valuable insights into the complex dynamics influencing media understanding. This research provides a foundation for further exploration of the psychological dimensions of media engagement and its implications **for individual perspectives on representation**.

Introduction:

In political psychology, understanding how personality traits interact with political orientations is crucial. Our study builds on prior work, expanding into media perception. While personality's impact on politics is known, the interaction with media representation remains unclear.

Relevance:
In the contemporary information landscape, where media plays a central role in shaping public opinion, understanding how an individual's political orientation, sensibility, and empathy collectively influence their perception of media portrayal is crucial.

Previous Research:
Azekas' work laid a crucial foundation by establishing a link between narcissism and political orientations. Our study expands on this trajectory by incorporating additional dimensions of sensibility and empathy, aiming for a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors influencing interpretations of media representation.

Research Question and Objective:
Our research explores how political orientation, online sensibility, and empathy collectively shape perceptions of media misrepresentation. The primary objective is to unravel the intricate interplay of these variables, providing nuanced insights into media's multifaceted impact on individuals.

Importance:
This study bridges gaps in understanding political orientations, psychology, and media perception. By advancing frameworks, we contribute valuable insights to academic and public discourse, illuminating the nuances of media's role in shaping individual perspectives.

German Parties left-right:

Self-assessed →

Citizen's assessment →
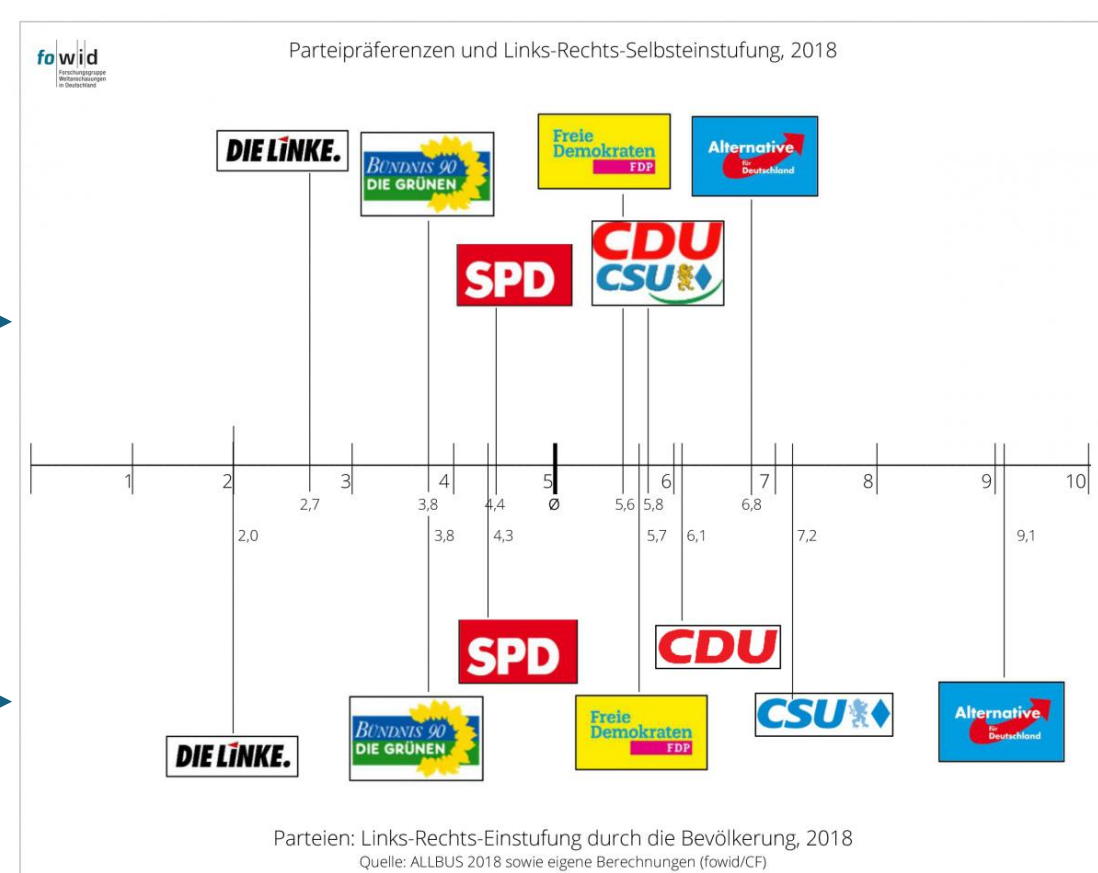
Conceptual Framework:

Political Orientation:
Defined using information from the German Federal Agency for Civic Education (bpb), focusing on the programmatic elements of key political parties in Germany—AFD, CDU/CSU, SPD, Die Grünen, FDP, Die Linke, and "Others," representing non-voters and uncertain participants.

Sensibility:
Operationalized through a multi-variable scale gauging an individual's responsiveness to online interactions. This scale assesses sensibility to potential mistreatment, including empathy to personal attacks or post removal, offering a nuanced understanding of participants' reactions in the online sphere.
[Example: 4 categories (never – often) "I myself was attacked by other people for my opinion."]

Empathy:
Operationalized through a comprehensive scale assessing individuals' empathy towards others experiencing mistreatment online. The scale captures various dimensions, providing insights into participants' empathy to others' well-being, including reactions to attacks or post removal.
[Example: 4 categories (never – often) "Users made hostile statements towards other persons or groups."]

Media misrepresentation(MMR):
Defined succinctly using a single-item measure in the questionnaire. Survey takers are explicitly asked about their subjective feelings regarding whether they perceive themselves as being misrepresented online. This streamlined definition allows for a direct assessment of participants' perceptions of media representation without introducing complexities.
[Item: 4 categories (strongly disagree – strongly agree) "Here in Germany, people like me are misrepresented in the media"]

Literature:
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1. Hypotheses:

I. An individual's Political Orientation influences the Individuals feeling of being represented wrongly in Media.
II. An individual's empathy to others being treated badly online enhances the Individuals feeling of being represented wrongly in Media.
III. An individual's sensibility to themselves being treated badly online enhances the Individuals feeling of being represented wrongly in Media.
IV. Both sensibility and empathy to bad treatment online and the political orientation enhance the individuals feeling of being represented wrongly in Media.

2. Data and Methods:

As part of the Course: "Hate and Intolerance in times of social crisis" at the University of Hamburg a survey study was conducted.
- Survey of population aged 18 to 69 (n=2200)
- Analysis included 2060 responses

Method: The study employs Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression to examine the relationship between emotions (specifically, anger and anxiety) and online discussion participation. This statistical approach allows for a nuanced exploration of how emotional states may influence individuals' engagement in online discourse within the specified societal themes.
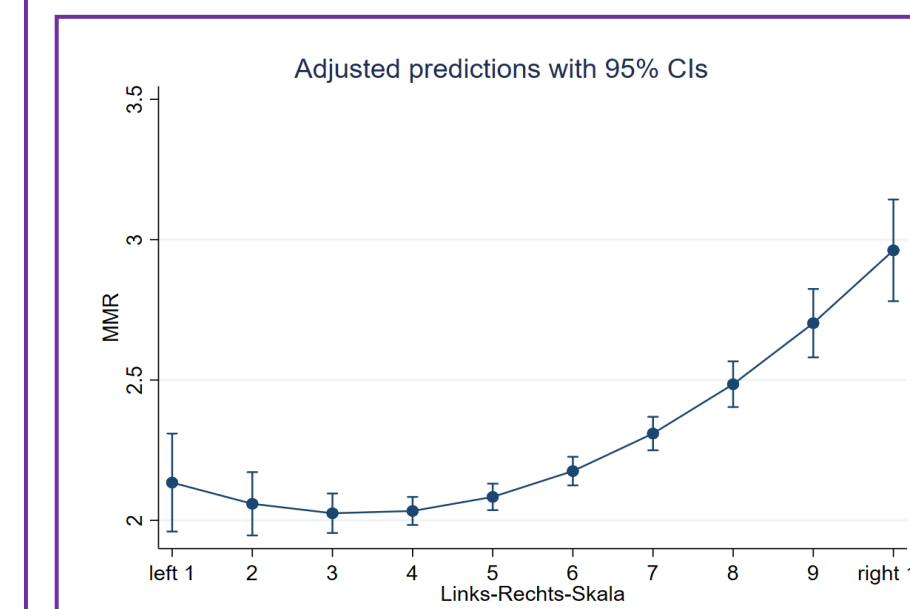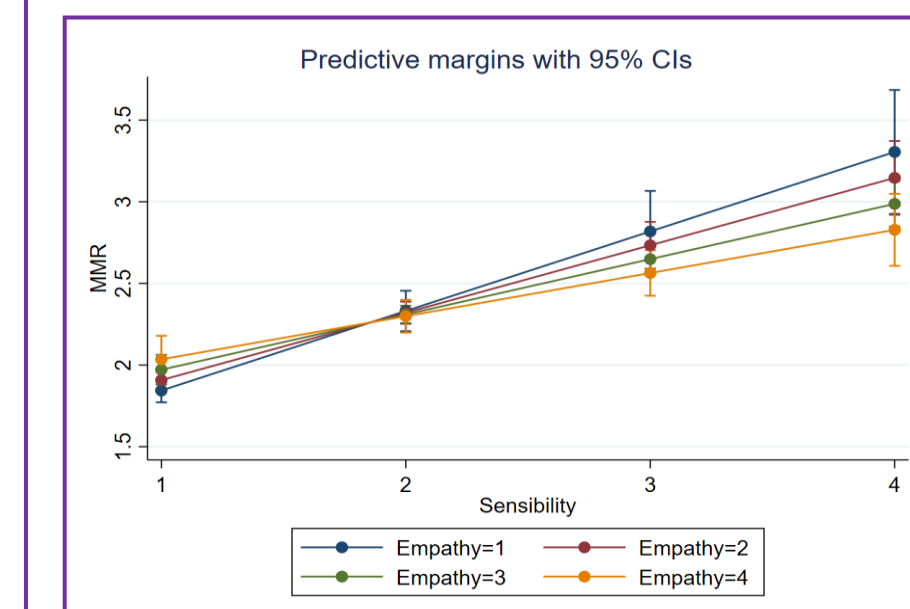
3.1. Hypothesis I:

Perceived medial misrepresentation
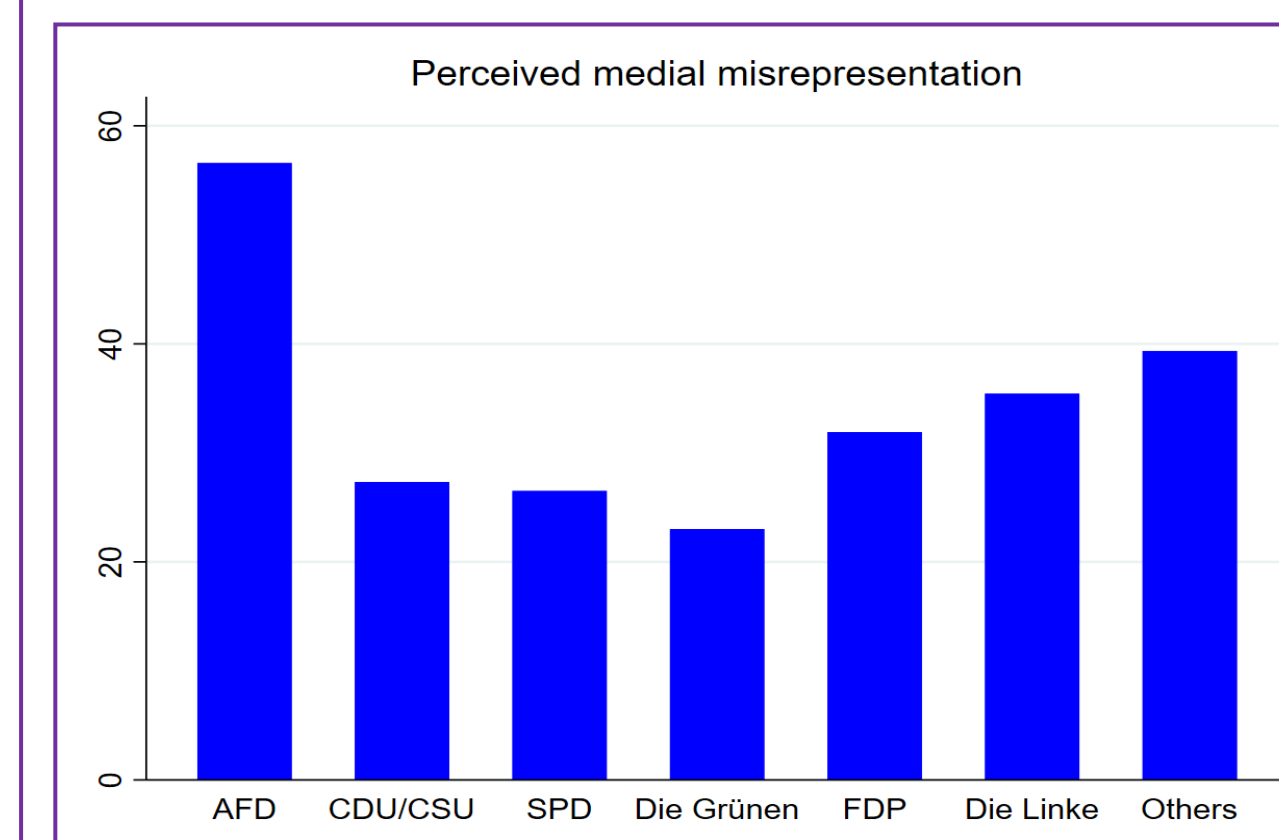
AfD-voters are more likely to perceive MMR

Non-AFD party voters less likely to perceive MMR

	MMR
age	-0.089***
	(0.00)
Hauptschulabschluss	
Mittlere Reife	-0.013
	(0.06)
Abitur	-0.022
	(0.06)
residence (west = 1)	-0.042
	(0.06)
sex (male = 1)	0.053*
	(0.04)
AFD	
CDU/CSU	-0.249***
	(0.07)
SPD	-0.239***
	(0.07)
Die Grünen	-0.255***
	(0.08)
FDP	-0.133***
	(0.10)
Die Linke	-0.125***
	(0.10)
others	-0.172***
	(0.07)
Observations	2044
Adjusted R^2	0.07

Standardized beta coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

3.2. Hypothesis II & III:

	(1) MMR	(2) MMR	(3) MMR
age	-0.096***	-0.060*	-0.013
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Hauptschulabschluss			
Mittlere Reife	-0.012	-0.025	-0.014
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
Abitur	-0.088**	-0.124***	-0.096***
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
residence (west = 1)	-0.060**	-0.062**	-0.055*
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)
sex (male = 1)	0.058**	0.053*	0.013
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
empathy		0.190***	
		(0.02)	
sensibility			0.326***
			(0.03)
Observations	2044	2048	2049
Adjusted R^2	0.01	0.05	0.11

Standardized beta coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Both empathy and sensibility exert discernible influence on an individual's perception of Media Misrepresentation (MMR).

Empathy by Political Group
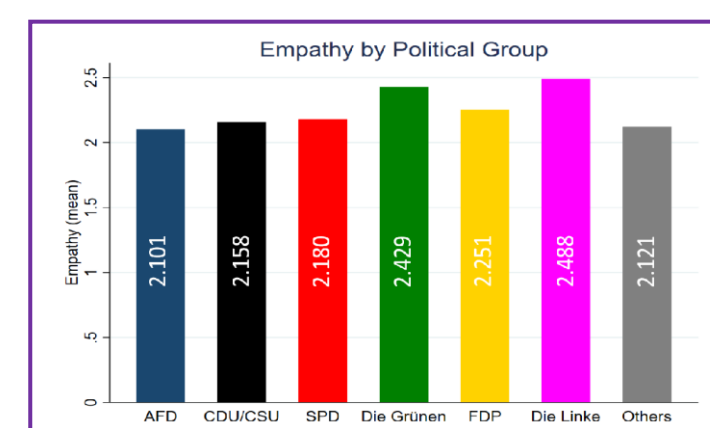
AFD voters exhibit less empathy than non-AFD voters.

Sensibility by Political Group

AFD-voters demonstrate higher sensibility compared to non-AFD voters.

3.3. Hypothesis IV:

Adjusted predictions with 95% CIs

U-shaped effect of political orientation on MMR

Predictive margins with 95% CIs

Moderating effect of sensibility on empathy

	(1) MMR	(2) MMR	(3) MMR	(4) MMR
age	-0.089***	-0.052*	-0.011	-0.010
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Hauptschulabschluss				
Mittlere Reife	-0.013	-0.026	-0.015	-0.017
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.05)	(0.05)
Abitur	-0.022	-0.058	-0.038	-0.042
	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)	(0.06)
residence (west = 1)	-0.042	-0.045*	-0.041	-0.041
	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)	(0.05)
sex (male = 1)	0.053*	0.048*	0.016	0.018
	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)	(0.04)
AFD				
CDU/CSU	-0.249***	-0.246***	-0.211***	-0.213***
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
SPD	-0.239***	-0.242***	-0.209***	-0.212***
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Die Grünen	-0.252***	-0.260***	-0.211***	-0.215***
	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)	(0.08)
FDP	-0.133***	-0.129***	-0.111***	-0.111***
	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Die Linke	-0.125***	-0.138***	-0.111***	-0.114***
	(0.10)	(0.10)	(0.09)	(0.09)
Others	-0.172***	-0.165***	-0.132***	-0.133***
	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)	(0.07)
Empathy		0.198***		0.030
		(0.02)		(0.03)
Sensibility			0.299***	0.281***
			(0.03)	(0.03)
Observations	2044	2044	2044	2044
Adjusted R^2	0.07	0.11	0.15	0.15

Standardized beta coefficients; Standard errors in parentheses
* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

4. Results:

Hypothesis I: Political Orientation does in fact influence an individual's perception of MMR.

Hypothesis II & III: Sensibility and empathy both shape an individual's perception of MMR.

Hypothesis IV: Sensibility serves as a moderator, influencing the relationship between empathy and MMR perceptions.
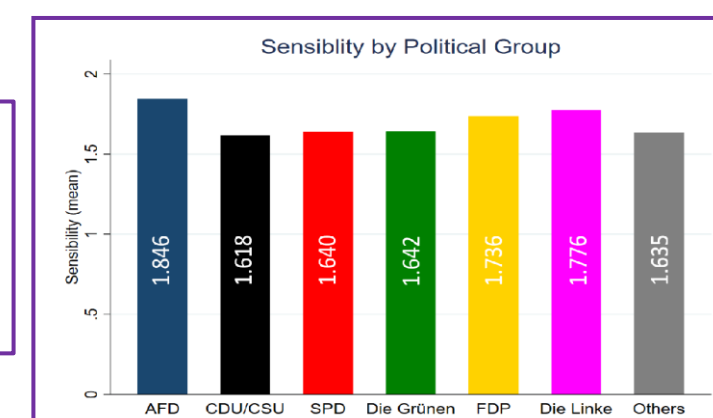
5. Conclusion:

Through comprehensive analysis of the data collected from our online survey, several crucial insights have emerged, shedding light on the intricate dynamics of individuals' perceptions within the online sphere.

The mediation effect suggests that an individual's sensibility to online interactions plays a pivotal role in shaping how empathy influences their perception of MMR.

This study not only contributes to the growing body of research on online discourse but also highlights the need for a more comprehensive understanding of the psychological factors influencing the perception of MMR. These insights have implications for both academic discourse and public awareness, emphasizing the multifaceted nature of online interactions and their impact on individual perspectives.