

Injustice Narratives of Vaccine Critics

Insights from German Telegram Groups

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Introduction

The Corona pandemic, the “mother of all crises” (Lessenich 2020, 217), has determined our global social interactions since 2020 and is still a catalyst to highlight political, social and individual grievances. In 2020 and 2021, high infection rates, lockdowns and vaccination debates shaped the public discourse in Germany and beyond. While it is widely agreed protection of health and the guarantee of health care should always be the priority of political action, the Covid-19 pandemic made global structural injustices in health care visible (Iyengar et al. 2020). Despite the global health crisis, movements manifested themselves that not only criticized anti-pandemic policies, but also rejected vaccinations in the same move: *QAnon*¹ and so called *Querdenken*² brought this fundamental opposition to the streets. Studies for German-speaking countries indicate that people with a critical attitude towards the state and who perceive themselves as marginalized due to political measures (curfews, lockdowns, regulations on gatherings, etc.) gather in these contexts (Frei, Schäfer and Nachtwey 2021). Not only the rhetoric of the speeches at these demonstrations, but also the attack on the Reichstag building in Berlin in August 2020 showed the radicalization of the scene. It is of particular interest to be able to understand which narratives these people use. Understanding their narrative could help in two ways: first, this could be an opportunity to trace the process of radicalization, and second, the content can make it clearer why not all adult German citizens will want to take advantage of the comprehensive vaccination offer from June 2021. By the end of the year 2021 still almost 9 million people over 18 years

1 *QAnon* is an American movement against the government and their Covid-politics. The protests became known worldwide for their march to the Capital in Washington D.C. 2020 (Conner/MacMurray 2021).

2 *Querdenken* is a German movement which was started by a small group of protesters in Stuttgart before growing into the most known Corona-politic protest movement nationwide (Plümpert/Neumayer/Pfaff 2021).

in Germany have not received a first vaccination against Covid-19 (Statista 2022). The number of unreported cases is even higher due to falsified vaccination cards in Germany (Kniestedt 2021).

To understand especially these people who have decided against a Covid-19 vaccination despite its availability, recommendations of the Standing Committee on Vaccination (STIKO) and social relevance, this paper will try to elaborate their narrative of injustice. The comprehension of narratives surrounding injustice, particularly in the context of vaccine opponents, bears significance not only for comprehending the dynamics of their movement, but also holds potential utility in informing responses to future (health) crises. Given the assumption that the understanding of injustice among vaccine opponents is fundamental to the overall societal perception, it could, to some extent, contribute to tracing the rationale behind vaccine hesitancy beyond scientific evidence. The reference to injustice is relevant to make clear why these individuals sporadically perceive themselves as marginalized (Frei, Schäfer and Nachtwey 2021) when, at the same time, they have made a conscious decision not to receive the available vaccines. The content will be accessed via *Telegram*, as this messenger in particular plays a central role in the exchange and discussions of corona vaccination critics (Curley, Siapera and Carthy 2022). The three German channels and one group I selected were publicly accessible at the time of the survey between October and December 2021. Their content is primarily concerned with criticism of Covid-19 vaccines and policies against measures to contain the virus. However, during my research, one channel was deleted by *Telegram* early on and the group was removed in November 2021 due to violations of *Telegram*'s terms of service. By analyzing the virtual narratives of Corona vaccination critics, I have gained insights into their perceptions of injustice and marginalization, as well as their reasons for refusing to get vaccinated. However, to fully understand the social and political implications of vaccine hesitancy, it is important to consider the broader context in which it occurs. In particular, the Corona pandemic has triggered protests and debates about the role of the state, the legitimacy of public health measures, and the distribution of resources and opportunities in society. Examining the theoretical framing of injustice can help shed light on these complex issues and guide policy responses that promote social inclusion, equity, and resilience in times of crisis. Hence, the following key questions will also need to be asked of the generated material: how is injustice and the experience of injustice addressed? Who experiences unjust treatment as a result?

Corona Protests and Injustice

Social inequality becomes more visible during the Corona pandemic—for example the fact that people living in poorer circumstances are at higher risk of infection

(Powers et al. 2021). Populations such as single parents or students from socially deprived backgrounds are disproportionately more affected by the pandemic than others (Collins et al. 2021). But what unequal treatment were demonstrators against the Corona measures addressing? Was social injustice the basis of the argumentation or was a different starting point fundamental?

The Demonstrators

Christine Hentschel (2021) defines “corona publics” as “[...] gatherings of discontent over state policies toward the pandemic that manifest themselves in the squares and streets of German cities as well as in chat rooms or on YouTube” (ibid, 62). Hentschel explores these communities, whose common denominator is the critique of the coronavirus policy but who otherwise differ greatly in their social demographics (Frei, Schäfer and Nachtwey 2021; Reichhardt 2021). Narratives play an overriding role here, as they can be transmitted offline as well as online. Hentschel therefore also focuses on the narratives of the “corona publics” (2021, 62) which must remain vague and malleable, but nevertheless endure in order to be able to carry the consensus further (ibid, 64). Frei, Schäfer and Nachtwey’s (2021) ethnographic observations, especially in relation to the speeches given, reveal the continuous use of the words “dictatorship” and “division.” It also became clear that the participants perceived themselves as the “marginalized” (ibid., 254–255). In addition, it is described that the participants of the demonstrations felt as the “oppressed,” who perceive a possible vaccination obligation as a threat and generally see themselves deprived of their freedom by the measures (ibid, 253). The demonstrations are predominantly organized on the messenger service *Telegram* and reach people who were not politically active before (Richter and Salheiser 2021, 80). It seems evident that an influence of injustice affects and is reproduced in the demonstrations.

The Understanding of Injustice

Preliminary considerations for such a research project reveal that understanding injustice narratives based on individual data from social media becomes more challenging due to the absence of the ability to follow up with clarifying questions. At all times, each statement made by the participants under investigation must be accepted as a subjective perception without intervention from the researchers. This realization justifies not only the need for a long data collection period, as repetitions in arguments and text fragments are relevant, but also the focus on individual statements in chats and channels, which, through their accumulation, contribute to a spectrum of subjectively shared narratives within the anti-vaccine group. Shklar’s

concept of the “Sense of injustice” from *The Faces of Injustice* (1990) provides a perspective on this subjective perception of injustice. It acknowledges that individual feelings of injustice can be subjective but can still point to objective injustices. When people discuss injustice on social media, they can express their sense of injustice by pointing out specific cases or systems that they perceive as unfair. Judith Shklar’s concept of a *Sense of injustice* refers to an individual’s ability to recognize and respond to instances of injustice in their society. According to Shklar, this sense of injustice is a crucial aspect of political liberalism and is necessary for a healthy democratic society. Shklar argues that the *Sense of injustice* is not simply an emotional response to unfair treatment, but rather a moral judgment about the legitimacy of certain social practices and institutions. It is an awareness of the ways in which power is distributed within society, and a recognition of the ways in which certain groups may be disadvantaged or marginalized. By cultivating a *Sense of injustice*, individuals can become more aware of the injustices around them and can take action to challenge and change these practices. Shklar sees this as a fundamental aspect of citizenship and a necessary condition for maintaining a just and democratic society.

Injustice is part of every (modern) society and influences it beyond the micro level: according to Shklar, perceived injustice is a personal experience caused by particular events, which can also lend to public consequences. Shklar does not propose a universally applicable framework for contrasting injustice with justice, but instead highlights the significance of moral perception and the interpretation of experiences of injustice within democratic systems. Perspectives from (political) philosophy regarding injustice connect it to factors within the economic, social, and political realms, and assume the ability to differentiate between injustice and mere unhappiness (Shklar 1990).

To provide a more comprehensive framework for contextualizing these subjective perceptions originating from the *Telegram* chats and channels, it is essential to adopt a broader perspective. This approach transcends individual evaluation and entails an examination of structural (and epistemic) injustice. By doing so, we gain a deeper understanding of injustice not only at the individual level but also within the wider context of societal and systemic dynamics. Such an encompassing approach enables us to comprehend and address injustice in a more nuanced manner. Furthermore, drawing on Miranda Fricker’s (2007) work on epistemic injustice, which explores how certain individuals are systematically disadvantaged in terms of knowledge transmission and interpretation, provides a valuable framework for a more comprehensive understanding and addressing of injustice within both individual and broader societal contexts. Fricker’s work on testimonial and hermeneutic injustice concerns the ways in which individuals or groups can be wronged in their capacity to communicate and have their experiences understood and acknowledged. *Testimonial injustice* refers to situations in which someone is not given the same level of credibility or respect as others when sharing their experiences or

knowledge due to some prejudice or stereotype held by the listener. *Hermeneutic injustice*, on the other hand, occurs when there is a structural limitation in the shared resources of a particular community, making it difficult for a particular group to communicate their experiences effectively. Fricker argues that testimonial and hermeneutic injustices can have significant effects on individuals and groups, as they can lead to silencing, marginalization, and exclusion. She suggests that recognizing and addressing these forms of injustice is necessary for building more just and inclusive communities.

Individuals who experience hermeneutic injustice would be more likely to perceive injustice as misfortune in the context of Shklar's (1990) remarks. Fricker argues that hermeneutic marginalization results from systematic hermeneutic injustice, which is steadily reproduced in the absence of enlightenment. Thus, individuals who are systematically affected by hermeneutic injustice have "[a] more general susceptibility to different kinds of injustice" (Fricker 2007, 159). Consequently, people who are exposed to these forms of epistemic injustice are not only affected because of their statements based on social affiliation, but also marginalized because of their lack of knowledge about the injustice they face: "For something to be an injustice, it must be harmful but also wrongful, whether because discriminatory or because otherwise unfair" (Fricker 2007, 151). For Fricker, the forms of injustice are as liquid (Schicktan 2012, 280) as Judith Shklar's (1990) sense of injustice. Both concepts are subject to commonly shared perceptual schemas of (in)justice and society's dispositions about social attributions. Central to my data is not only the subjective *Sense of injustice* (Shklar 1990) in the participants' content but it also needs to be considered whether testimonial or hermeneutic injustices (Fricker 2007) occur from the perspective of the participants, in order to assess their overall societal relevance.

Methods: Qualitative Analysis of Telegram Content

At the time of the study, *Telegram* was a central platform for German-speaking vaccine-critical communication and had 8 million active users in Germany. The platform was founded in Russia in 2013 and is currently headquartered in Dubai (Telegram 2022). The messaging app makes it possible to share text, images, files, voice messages, videos and links with up to 200,000 people in groups or with unlimited numbers in channels. It is not mobile number based, other users can also be found by their usernames. These are public as soon as they have been defined. One's own cell phone number remains hidden unless it has been changed in the privacy settings. It can be stated that the exchange on *Telegram* can be done via the cell phone number or only via the usernames. The channels and group chats available on *Telegram* can, but do not have to, be password-protected, or require an invitation from

another group/channel member or are freely accessible and can thus be found via the search function on *Telegram*.

The most important difference between channels and chats is that it is not possible to write your own messages in channels per se, but links and forwardings can be collected there. However, depending on the setting, there is a comment option on these links, so that the exchange can take place there. In addition, the creators of the channels can designate admins who can not only preselect the forwards, but these can even compose messages themselves and designate other participants to whom this can also be possible. Moreover, it is also possible that in the publicly accessible channels, redirects to appropriate groups or other channels are shared (Telegram 2022).

Telegram's infrastructure and moderation practices differ from those of many other platforms, and public groups and channels can remain accessible while still being difficult to monitor systematically. It is relevant for my present work that these groups and channels are accessible and public for all *Telegram* users. For the present study, it was relevant that the selected groups and channels were accessible and public for all Telegram users. Public accessibility reduced, but did not eliminate, research-ethical concerns. Therefore, group and channel names were anonymized, usernames were not reported, and the analysis focuses on aggregated narrative patterns rather than identifiable individuals.

The search for suitable groups and channels for the first overview was carried out using the *Telegram* search function. The keywords used were combinations of “anti,” “against” and “non” with “vaccination,” “corona,” “corona politics,” and similar. The following self-defined selection criteria were applied to select the groups and channels analyzed in my research:

1. The groups and channels must be publicly accessible in order to avoid research ethics problems due to the intrusion into a private (virtual) space.
2. The news content should be 60% Corona-related. This excludes, for example, channels and groups that only offer themselves as a networking opportunity and give people a platform to find like-minded people in their own environment and then communicate with them privately.
3. The focus of the exchanged message content should be on the written word. Emojis, videos, GIFs and voice messages not only mean more data but also increase the size of the chats to be exported.
4. The groups and channels were to generate a reliable flow of messages over the entire survey period. Accordingly, groups and channels were sorted out that provided output for two weeks but were then neglected by members.

The relevant names of the group and channels were simplified to ensure anonymization to the full extent. From these points of view, the composition of the source material is as follows:

Table 1: Overview of the examined Telegram content from 11th October 2021 – 31st December 2021

Names (simplified and anonymized)	Exchange type	Number of members/subscribers (At the beginning and end of the survey)	Messages per day (average)
Group1	Chatgroup	6,076 members 7,023 members	750
Channel1	Admin-managed channel without the possibility of commenting	22,002 subscriptions 24,356 subscriptions	15
Channel2 (closed in the beginning of November 2021)	Admin-managed channel with possibility to comment	3,117 members 3,363 members	90
Channel3fig 1	Admin-managed channel with possibility to comment	1,329 members 1.250 members	10

The starting point of the survey was set for 11th October 2021, as from this date the Covid19-citizen tests would no longer be available free of charge. Until then, these had made it possible for German citizens to be tested free of charge for the Covid-19 virus by rapid test. Although this regulation was quickly revised, it still served as a starting point. The coding ended with the last news of the 31st of December 2021, as it was already apparent in the analysis that the patterns of argumentation and content are constantly repeated. The material comprised about 67,000 text messages for the 12-week survey period. About 20% of these are emojis, which were also sent as individual messages and were not selected by the export process. Of the remaining approximately 53,600 messages, only the required 60% are also related to Corona discourse. Thus, approximately 32,000 text messages were included in the analysis. The expected narrative units of chat messages, being relatively brief, are insufficient to fully capture the narrative on their own. However, by employing “stories that address both cognitive and emotional aspects” (Gesser-Edelsburg 2021, 2), the exchange between the individuals under investigation allows for a comprehensive depiction of information and attitudes. This approach enables a deeper under-

standing of relevant factors, particularly in relation to the transmission of information. The data was exported and then processed in a way that was compatible for the software *Atlas.ti* 9. Afterwards, a qualitative content analysis according to Kuckartz (2019) could be performed with the help of *Atlas.ti* 9. The deductive and inductive working method, the mixed form of category formation, and the constant reference back to the research questions is recommended above all by Kuckartz (2019) and lent itself to my software-assisted qualitative content analysis (Kuckartz 2014).

Results: Mistrust, Exclusion, Division: All Unfair?

The analysis reveals three main themes: widespread mistrust in the pandemic strategy, social exclusion and loneliness among the non-vaccinated, and a belief in underlying injustices. These findings highlight the deep-seated mistrust, divisions, and perceived injustices within the content, providing insights into the perspectives of non-vaccinated individuals during the pandemic.

Mistrust

The general criticism of the political strategy against the Corona pandemic is evident in the content studied. It is fostered by the feeling of being lied to and based on the lack of trust in the measures that were implemented by the authorities:

So what remains is the prospect of another 6 months of sadism...and then they're guaranteed to come up with something...I don't believe ANYTHING they say anymore...³ (Group1_P29 10/18/2021)

For 2 years, there has been no transparency, promises are broken, people are isolated, opinion is criminalized, justice is denied, etc. (Channel1_P1 12/27/2021)

The distrust in the political authorities is initially justified primarily by the “unfair” treatment of unvaccinated persons by politicians and the resulting measures. During the survey period, this framework changes in the chat group studied. Politicians, virologists, and all related institutions are increasingly criticized for their promotion of vaccination (especially because of the discourse around booster vaccinations in October 2021). In the process, those in power are referred to as “criminal” or as “felons.” This also results in the general vaccine criticism, which is subsumed by the

3 The quoted statements have been translated into English verbatim by me. No spelling errors have been included, while punctuation and capitalization have been preserved for authenticity.

lack of trust and the lack of trust is growing by their reproduction of the vaccine criticism. Here, the vaccine criticism manifests itself through the beliefs that the sampled users assume Covid-19 vaccination causes at least severe illness.

This conviction was maintained throughout the whole investigation period: the personal observations of chat and channel participants are particularly relevant to the argument about vaccine safety. For example, various participants reported knowing people affected by vaccine damage and deaths in proximity due to vaccination ("I now know of 5 [death] cases after the swamp,⁴ no sick person because of this invented disease" (Group1_P46 09.11.2021). This additionally strengthens the considerations to remain unvaccinated, even if this could lead to loneliness, exclusion from the social life or job loss⁵ in individual cases of the examined content.

Exclusion and Division

Loneliness and isolation from family or social environments due to non-vaccination is the result of two factors according to the subjective experience of the sample group: The non-vaccinated are excluded from social life based on various measures (test regulations; 2G rule [entry to restaurants, cinemas, events, etc. only for recovered or vaccinated]). The stigmatization by the "mainstream media" that reinforces exclusion and thus discriminates against the unvaccinated. According to the material, this leads to some participants feeling lonely and seeking understanding in the groups. This strengthens the sense of community among vaccination critics.

I'm increasingly on my own. I'm persona non grata, so to speak. It doesn't make life any easier, but vaccination will never be an option for me. (Group1_P37 06.11.2021)

Remember you are not alone! We are many, we hold together & do not give up! But we must be patient. (Channel_P5 08.11.2021)

The division of society is a process started by politics and its measures and driven by the reporting of the "mainstream media." They experience this division as a passive process that is primarily driven by political means and their influence on the majority society:

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- 4 "Swamp" is used by the investigated in the chat group as a synonym for the word vaccination. This illustrates the devaluation of the vaccination.
 - 5 Job loss is discussed at various points, as certain participants also reject any measures of testing or the process of testing itself. Conversations about the necessity of wearing masks are similar.

[...] The result of one and a half years of Corona is a split in society that is unparalleled. Public broadcasting has played a major role in this. It fulfills its responsibility to build bridges between the camps and promote exchange less and less. (Channel1_P1 05.10.2021)

What remains central in the context of felt exclusion in social life, discrimination and division by the political authorities and the media is the shared opinion that this happens unjustifiably. The blaming of the unvaccinated, which is dominated by the media, the regulations and anti-pandemic politics, reinforces the sense of unwarranted blame, especially considering the exclusion of those studied. The material makes clear that specific measures are viewed according to perspective: when it is officially argued that the incidence values are high and that it is primarily unvaccinated people who become infected this is, according to the content examined, simply due to the fact, that they have to test themselves more common. They don't see the higher risk of infection because of the non-vaccination. After their argumentation politicians and the media want to create a public image that it is only the unvaccinated people who are ill and are therefore to blame for the closures, lockdowns and 3G/2G regulations:

The bad thing is that you are no longer heard with logical thoughts and explanations, suddenly you are even guilty as an unvaccinated person. (Group1_P4 13.12.2021)

The statements assign blame for the measures to the vaccinated because they reaffirm the legitimacy of these measures by their supposed non-questioning of the political decisions. In doing so, they also support the public blaming of the unvaccinated for the existence of the pandemic. This argument is distorted to the point that, according to the understanding of the content examined, it is not the unvaccinated who are to blame for the Covid-19 pandemic, but politicians, the pharmaceutical industry, and other policymakers. According to this understanding, the vaccinated part of the population is itself responsible for the existing measures of the pandemic, because they support them and direct the anger about it to the wrong people: to the unvaccinated instead of the politicians.

Merkel has said that the unvaccinated will soon face severe restrictions. Starting with daily tests at the workplace. This is sick, because the vaccinated are contagious. (Group1_P9 3.11.2021)

The members of the sample groups see themselves as the healthy ones, who also want to stay healthy and accordingly do not get vaccinated. According to this understanding, the experienced exclusion becomes even more unjustified, because most

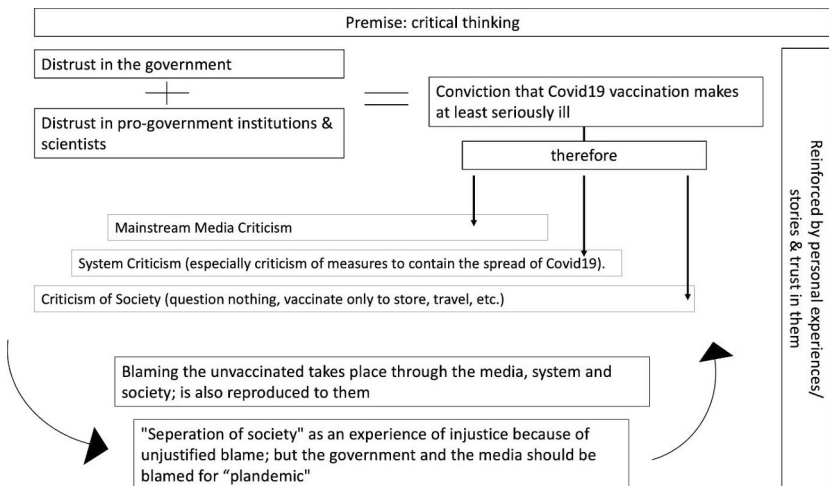
of them only want to stay healthy and do not want to expose themselves to the dangers of the vaccines. Nonetheless, a vaccination pressure is exerted on them, which is reinforced by the opinion in the media. Criticism of the measures, apart from the wearing of the mask (the “rag”), is particularly evident in connection with the testing strategy:

In this country, no restaurant can deny you access because you're black, because you're gay, or because you have red hair. Quite simply because discrimination does not work legally in this country. That's how we were taught, and because domestic law can never take precedence over fundamental rights. Except in the case of healthy people. Even if they are officially “tested” as healthy on a daily basis. From now on, every restaurant in the city is allowed to deny them access. With the express reason that they are “only healthy” [...] (Group1_P42 26.10.2021)

They describe themselves as the healthy ones, who would be “made sick” by the vaccination. In addition, they speak of a vaccination compulsion through which they feel “socially pilloried” (Group1_P34 25.10.2021): “[...] Every little restriction is now blamed on the unvaccinated” (Group1_P19 11.10.2021).

The central results of my investigation can therefore be presented in a diagram as follows. This should make the basic logic and the sense of injustice in connection with the lack of trust more comprehensible.

Fig. 1: Overview over results of the narrative of injustice from the point of view of the content studied.



The figure shows in conclusion how the individual views of the respondents were linked, and under which premises they were consistently reproduced over the survey period. Assuming a critical thinking perspective, mistrust in the government and politically affiliated institutions is expressed. In this particular case, the dominant belief is that the recommended vaccinations not only cause severe illness but also provide no protection against Covid-19. Personal narratives, which are fully trusted, support these beliefs. As a result, discontent accumulates towards the so-called mainstream media, generating a general critique of the system and stigmatizing the majority of vaccinated German citizens as blind and obedient. The injustice that emerges as an output is primarily the unwarranted blame they experience and the division of society. This experienced injustice, in turn, reinforces the shown cycle of mistrust in politics.

The Contextualization of Injustice

People pride themselves on their “social competence.” Unfortunately, they lack the moral competence to stand up when injustice happens. (Group1_P33 10/22/2021)

The injustice is so great and by now so clear that blind people would have to see it. (Group1_P26 12/24/2021)

The frequency of the use of “unjust” or “injustice” as explicit terms is low. However, when injustice is mentioned, it is as a comment that the majority society does not see the “Corona injustice” and does not do anything about it. According to this, injustice happens primarily under the guise of blackmail, which, however, is only perceived as such by the non-vaccinated and is not necessarily classified as unjust by the vaccinated.

Another use of “unfair” occurs sporadically when talking about what made the sample group “critical” and “awake”:

[...] I was often sick and experienced many injustices as a result. I think that makes you see a lot of things differently [...] (Group1_P9 21.10.2021)

[...] and unfortunately it seems that previous suffering, experienced injustices open the eyes (Group1_P6 10/21/2021)

This dialogue makes clear that the *critical way of thinking* is attributed to injustices in the biography. In this context, the expressions “thinking differently” and “being awakened” are used again by “open the eyes” (Group1_P16). Other respondents also

refer to a similar rationale when they talk about how they have already “been through a lot” and accordingly “don’t trust anyone.”

Nevertheless, across the survey period, personal narratives of injustices experienced are not common. The content studied only hints at these experiences and keeps them general. They do not see themselves fundamentally as victims of injustice, but as the *awakened* and *enlightened ones* who recognize it as such and are only waiting for everyone to understand the “agenda” behind the so-called “Plandemic.” It is speculated that in the future events will occur that are supposed to justify the behavior of the unvaccinated and it is then put into perspective that one is now exposed to this exclusion: “Let’s see how living together will be just THEN” (Chat1_P4 11.10.2021).

Injustice as a term is thus rarely used in context. Injustice is rather implied when it comes to the unjustified blame, the experienced exclusion and the discrimination by vaccinated people, media, and politics.

Discussion: The Perspectives of Injustice

The following remarks focus on the sample groups’ own subjectively perceived *Sense of injustice* (Shklar 1990). The content analysis reveals the clash of two perspectives in our society’s reality: the users in the sampled groups who refuse vaccination out of the belief that it may harm them, feeling excluded and treated unfairly, versus those who find it unfair, despite recommended vaccinations, to tolerate further restrictions due to the high number of unvaccinated people. The narrative of the unvaccinated and the way arguments are presented suggest a fundamentally different view of democracy. According to Shklar (1990), in a democratic society, people need to publicly acknowledge when something is unjust. Therefore, democracy should recognize and provide space for addressing feelings of injustice. Some users believe that democracy has become a “disguised dictatorship” due to the pandemic, rendering the elected officials irrelevant. This differing view of political structures (Koos 2021) and the desire for a new order can explain why people have different perceptions of injustice. While society observes people suffering from measurable social inequality during the pandemic, protesters spread conspiracy theories and feel they have been treated unfairly.

In essence, it can be stated that there are essential differences between the individuals affected by (measurable) injustice during the pandemic and the subjects under investigation. Firstly, there is a proactive decision against not only vaccination but also the testing strategy in the present case. Secondly, there is the non-measurable marginalization of those studied. While marginalization may affect certain populations more than others due to socio-economic factors such as income, origin, place of residence, diseases, etc., the users analyzed here perceive themselves as

marginalized based on their vaccination status. Their perception of being subjected to political and democratic injustice is a result of feeling that their perspective, concerns, and criticism are not taken seriously or invalidated. This phenomenon aligns with Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, which refers to the systematic suppression or devaluation of certain knowledge claims and experiences due to prejudice or power imbalances. Those who are vaccinated or support prevailing political and medical opinions may dismiss the concerns and experiences of the unvaccinated as unimportant or irrational, leading to epistemic injustice. The voices of the unvaccinated may not be heard or considered valid contributions to the discourse on pandemic control. This imbalance in perceiving and recognizing the experiences and perspectives of the unvaccinated can give rise to a sense of political injustice. However, reconstructing these claims through the lens of epistemic injustice does not mean that every rejected knowledge claim should be understood as epistemically unjust. Rather, the point is that the actors themselves interpret the dismissal of their concerns as a form of testimonial or hermeneutic marginalization. It creates the impression that their concerns are not adequately taken into account, resulting in their perceived disadvantage in democratic society due to their vaccination status. This perception of political injustice further reinforces the feeling of marginalization and exclusion experienced by the subjects, and this perception further reinforces distrust toward official institutions and increases reliance on *Telegram*-based counter-publics.

Discussion: The Crisis of Trust

As shown in figure 1 before, the distrust is fundamental for the understanding of injustice and the reproduced narrative. The only trust that is expressed in this communication is for those who think alike. This is particularly evident in the case of vaccine criticism: the analysis showed that official recommendations and surveys regarding the various vaccines are not trusted, but personal contributions from other people in the chat group or link channels are *never* questioned. When people report that they know of deaths after vaccination, or at least know people who have become seriously ill as a result, this is not treated with suspicion. This is mainly due to the prevailing belief that vaccination at least makes people seriously ill and that in the course of time those vaccinated will die from the consequences in a vague and unspecified future. The analysis showed that these expectations, combined with the personal stories of those negatively affected by vaccination, are fundamental to the position against pro-vaccination discourse:

Group-based misanthropy in the service of the criminal pharmaceutical industry is fascistoid, at the latest since 11.10. we live in a 2-caste society. Unvaccinated par-

ticipation in society is now “luxury.” The vaccination compulsion must go away, it divides! (Group3_P1 12.10.2021)

The “crisis of trust” in all institutions leads to official information being classified as insufficient (Goldenberg 2021, 109–111). To compensate for this, people could either continue to inform themselves until they feel they are sufficiently informed by official institutions, or they look for other sources, or they trust people to bring the content to them instead.

But those who, as in the present study, assume that they *have to* critically question everything the government and the “mainstream media” report, will not be able to restore the lack of trust, especially not if they are caught up in a feedback loop of misinformation within their social group. The reason for this distrust can only be vaguely surmised from the self-attributions of the subjects in the group. The messages reflect that the individuals already describe themselves as having “always been critical.” Lack of trust in (scientific) institutions, politics and the media is not equated with mistrust but with the “ability to think critically.” In this context, critical thinking about scientific content is not per se a denial of trust in science (Goldenberg 2021, 117).

Goldenberg (ibid.) suggests that many individuals who are hesitant or resistant to vaccines do not necessarily hold anti-science beliefs, but instead have concerns about the way vaccines are developed, tested, and marketed. They may feel that their voices and experiences are not being taken seriously by healthcare providers and government officials, or that they are being pressured or coerced into vaccinating themselves or their children.

According to Goldenberg (ibid.), these concerns can be seen as a response to broader forms of social and political injustice, such as systemic racism, poverty, and inequality, which have led to a general lack of trust in institutions and authorities. The anti-vaccine movement, therefore, can be seen as a symptom of a larger problem of distrust and alienation from the healthcare system. In the present work, trust shows up primarily detached from scientific data: It is most evident when the personal narratives of other group or channel members are not challenged, ensuring that the narrative of exclusionary government or harmful Covid-19 vaccination is reproduced.

Accordingly, those under investigation have “horizontal trust,” not in all fellow citizens as Budnik (2021, 24) elaborates, but at least in those they perceive to be same-thinking fellow citizens. The “vertical trust” (ibid.) is no longer present, so that those under investigation long for a reboot of the system. Therefore, it is less surprising that the investigated contents finding themselves in their own representations of

injustice through division and unjustified blame, withdraw more and more into the virtual spheres of action of those who are supposed to know better.⁶

As the results of the German COSMO survey (Betsch et al 2022a) indicate too, general trust in institutions and the federal government declined over the winter months of 2021, and 56.5% of respondents said in January 2022 that they tended to trust the German government less than in the months before (Betsch et al 2022b). An impact in the distrust is named as the failure of politicians to fulfill their promises contributes to a mindset of suspicion among those who I investigated. In the context of this study, the statement made by German Minister of Health Jens Spahn in a speech to the Bundestag on November 18, 2020 is particularly significant: "I give you my word: there will be no compulsory vaccination in this pandemic." Individuals who are investigated use such declarations as a basis for criticizing those in power. Despite the absence of a mandatory vaccination requirement, they believe that they are being indirectly forced to get vaccinated through various coronavirus-related measures or specific testing and 2G regulations, which they perceive as blackmail. This skepticism is reinforced by political implications that further erode trust (Shklar 1990) and even (temporary) law changes are viewed as an injustice by members of this group (Harbach 2008, 61).

The people examined in the chat groups and channels are presumably increasingly people who have not only been skeptical of political institutions since the Corona pandemic. They write about having "always been critical," which implies distrust. Relevant literature also indicates that vaccine-critical individuals tend not to trust political decision makers, scientific institutions or authorities (van Mulukom et al. 2022, 6; Schmid et al. 2017, 16; WHO 2017). Consequently, damaged trust in government and resulting conspiracy theories also have a negative impact on society as a whole and its approach to knowledge (Butter 2020; Milošević Đorđević et al. 2021). Moreover, with an increasing number of individuals being influenced by such theories, the likelihood may also rise that they will succumb to the discourse that fosters distrust.

However, conspiracy theory statements did not appear to be a determinant of distrust in politics, media, and science in the present study. In the present case, there is a correlation between distrust in politics and distrust in government-related science, which are under the influence of conspiracy theory beliefs. It is nevertheless clear where and in whom trust is placed. Trust is only placed in people and reports that share the opinions and criticisms. They are not questioned and often use

6 That could be attributed to the emerging phenomenon known as "pandemic fatigue" (Lilleholt et al 2020) which can naturally affect vaccinated individuals as well. Pandemic fatigue refers to a general weariness or exhaustion experienced by individuals due to the prolonged duration and ongoing challenges associated with a pandemic, such as restrictions on daily life and the overall impact on mental and emotional well-being.

“emotional language” (Germani and Biller-Andorno 2021, 4–14) or “emotional grip” (Hentschel 2021, 64) and focus on their own suffering:

I just can't take it anymore. There must finally be peace and quiet again...
(Chat1_P4 20.10.2021)

The literature provides evidence that people who believe in conspiracy theories are also more likely to distrust science (van Prooijen, Spadaro, and Wang 2021; Goldenberg 2021). The content studied indicated that while scientists who were closer to the government were more likely to be rejected⁷ while scientists who addressed or wanted to address vaccination side effects, for example, were trusted.⁸

Trust and reputation are not turned away from science per se, but only from those scientists whose views do not conform with the ideological narratives of the sample groups. This view is biased but not apodictically anti-scientific.

Discussion: The (Postfactual) Source of Knowledge

If scientific expertise, studies and the resulting guidelines for and by politicians are not to be trusted, there are two options for those affected: they either rely entirely on themselves and their perceptions or seek and create new sources of information (Holzer et al. 2021). Such new sources of information which were dominant in the chat and channels investigated are for example German Internet magazines such as *Rubikon – Magazin für die kritische Masse*⁹, *NachDenkSeiten – Die kritische Website*.¹⁰ But also, videos by Prof. Sucharit Bhakdi, a microbiologist who has received multiple

7 For example, the German virologist Christian Drosten or the head of the Robert Koch Institute Lothar Wiehler. Both had a major media impact on the information Germans gained throughout the pandemic, especially at the beginning.

8 For example, German pathologist Peter Schirmacher (head of the pathology institute at the University of Heidelberg), who made it clear he wanted to autopsy more bodies of people who died contemporaneously after Covid19 vaccination.

9 This website (translated: Rubikon – Magazine for the critical masses) was referred to in some places by the investigators or recommended for further reading. Rubikon is basically more of a blog than a magazine where various independent journalists share their critical perspectives on current world affairs, relying more or less on official figures (e.g., those of the German Federal Statistical Office or the Paul Ehrlich Institute). Rubikon has also founded its own publishing house and distributes books that have even become German bestsellers. <https://www.rubikon.news> (30.10.2022).

10 This page (translated: NachDenkSeiten – the critical website) have also been frequently recommended in my analysis for gaining a “fresh” perspective. <https://www.nachdenkseiten.de> (30.10.2022).

awards from the scientific community who became a Covid-19 denier whose popular channel was eventually deleted from YouTube. As was evident in the previous findings, both forms of knowledge generation are found in the content studied, but they are confirmed and consolidated through personal narratives or eyewitness accounts rather than verified sources. The information of like-minded people becomes more relevant than results of science that says otherwise. In this context, Skudlarek (2021) reads this as an attempt by the individuals within these skeptical groups to regain control over their lives. For those who assume that the virus and the vaccination strategy follow a hidden agenda are better able to cope with the disarray of everyday life, since they are not made vulnerable by the mistrust they already have in the government. Neither by the virus nor by the vaccination nor by the “hypnotization” through the “mainstream media.”

This myth of invulnerability is also evident in the chat and channels. The more dominant the exchange about the supposed superiority through more knowledge or critical thinking was, the stronger the perception of unjustified blame assignment became.

With this own logic, it is almost impossible to simply accept statements since the supposed critical thinking and superior knowledge obstruct the acceptance of announcements regarding the Covid-19 virus by politicians or institutions as simply true. The people in my case studies have created their own “cultural knowledges” and this conditions the reading under which they view messages (Fiske 2007). It became also clear that the members of the sample groups either do not consume any news outside their *Telegram* circle of influence or evaluate the so-called “mainstream media” from perspectives formed exclusively by their own cultural knowledge. By sharing the content within the feedback loops of their channels, the studied reproduce their beliefs through their supposed (superior) understanding and reading. This makes it difficult to access and transfer knowledge from other social groups to those of the studied.

This better knowledge and selective perception with regard to science can be subsumed under the term *postfactual*: everyone chooses the truths that best fit their own positions and goals. Postfactual phenomena are characterized by the fact that they seek to trigger emotions in those who read or listen to them instead of generating facts. Awareness of what quality and outcome certain messages want to trigger must be trained (Ferretti 2021). Accordingly, the fact that certain websites or *YouTube* videos want to generate reach and capital through clicks must be reflected on more critically.

Conclusion

The content analysis of the data collected over the period from October 2021 to the end of December 2021 was not only able to show the self-affirming structures in the arguments of the vaccination critics. It also became clear that they were motivated by a feeling of being excluded and stigmatized and that they found alternative community support in the groups and channels on *Telegram*. Through this online exchange, they are also able to repeatedly verify their own ideas regarding the vaccination as a potential threat. This is supported, on the one hand, by the idea that those in power do not act in the interests of the health of the population and only represent the interests of the pharmaceutical industry. On the other hand, the content studied points to the hope of a “new system” soon. This additionally supports the feeling of group solidarity and togetherness as a coping mechanism for the felt alienation from the majority society. Representations of the unvaccinated in official public discourse were particularly involved. Nevertheless, the vaccination critics studied distinguish themselves by describing vaccinated persons as “sheeple” and “hypnotized” by the “mainstream media.”

It should be noted that the injustice narrative analyzed in my study only considers the unjustified blaming and exclusion of the vaccination critics themselves, while overlooking the fact that these opponents also reproduce similar injustices when they blame and exclude the broader society due to their non-vaccination. The argumentation logic of the persons in the chat group and the link channels is thus characterized by “emotional language” (Germani and Biller-Andorno 2021, 4–14) and focuses on their own experiences and experiences that verify their own thinking. Other ways of thinking are only included if they fit their counter-narrative, both of injustice and corona criticism. In doing so, they label those in power as criminal while pretending to only want to protect themselves from their division. Loneliness and exclusion from social life are accepted. The knowledge and reasoning they draw on seems to be primarily postfactual.

These findings do not map the full reality of corona vaccination critics’ lives, but they do show how difficult it can be to reach them on a different level. Reducing social injustice, structural problems, and a more open approach on the part of policymakers without stigma may not reduce the current number of unvaccinated but could create a higher level of trust that would be essential for future crises.

As highlighted by Goldenberg (2019) in her work, it is crucial to acknowledge issues of injustice and rebuild trust in institutions and authorities in order to address vaccine hesitancy and enhance public health outcomes. By actively listening to and responding to the concerns of individuals hesitant about vaccines, health-care providers and officials can foster stronger and more equitable relationships with their communities. In conclusion, the findings of this study underscore the imperative of confronting the fundamental social and structural determinants un-

derpinning vaccine hesitancy, as this serves as a vital foundation for cultivating public trust and fortifying societal resilience in times of crisis. Accordingly, policymakers face the challenge of devising a more progressive and inclusive strategy that not only nurtures trust but also effectively tackles vaccine hesitancy. The challenge for policymakers is therefore not only to correct misinformation, but to address the social and epistemic conditions under which institutional distrust becomes a plausible and emotionally compelling narrative.

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