What Role Does Media Entertainment Play in Emerging Adults' Political Identity and Engagement Across Cultures?

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In light of the controversial relationship and blurred lines between information and entertainment media, the current study's goal aimed at qualitatively exploring media entertainment's role in emerging adults' political identity formation and engagement. By analyzing 55 semistructured interviews from Germany, Croatia, Turkey, South Korea, and the Philippines, we examined how emerging adults in 5 countries—differing in tightness-looseness, political culture, and media freedom—explore alternative political identities (identity exploration) and commit to a set of political values (identity commitment). Across countries, notable similarities supported the notion of traditional and new forms of entertainment as universal drivers of political identity formation and engagement (e.g., informational source, broadening one's horizon). However, idiosyncrasies of countries reflected unique cultural values, beliefs, and norms, and the benefits of media entertainment pathways to political identity development appeared to depend on political freedom and democracy.

From the softening of political communication (Otto, Glogger, & Boukes, 2017) and the decline of political engagement (Prior, 2005) to "the gateway for the politically uninterested" (Andersen, 2019), the relationship between entertainment and politics remains controversial (Schneider, Bartsch, & Leonhard, 2021). However, soft news on TV, fictional narratives in novels, social dramas on video-streaming portals, and serious games—to mention a few examples—can stimulate more than experiences of escapism or pleasure (Oliver et al., 2018). Moreover, interpersonal communication on social networking sites (SNS) draws attention to political content (Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016) but can also entertain (Reinecke, Vorderer, & Knop, 2014). Recent research supports that entertainment experiences can have beneficial effects on political engagement (Schneider et al., 2021). As the willingness to engage in political decision making is vital for democracies, scrutinizing entertainment's role seems worthwhile.

Engagement builds on individuals' political identity, a specific facet of identity developing particularly during emerging adulthood—the period between adolescence and adulthood (Arnett, 2004; Núñez & Flanagan, 2016). In a media-saturated environment, emerging adults encounter different role models, norms, and values via entertaining media content and use these resources to explore new identities and consolidate their present identity (Brown, 2006; Lloyd, 2002; Pempek, Yermolayeva, & Calvert, 2009). Although emerging adults are avid users of entertainment media, researchers have thus far paid little attention to entertainment's role in political identity (Amnå, 2012). This is surprising because political content in entertainment media (Dohle & Vowe, 2014; Holbert, 2005) provides important information relevant to political opinion and thus identity formation. Moreover, specific forms of entertainment experiences—characterized as being moving and meaningful or self-transcendent (Oliver et al., 2018)—open new avenues for emerging adults to explore and consolidate their political identity. Such experiences overcome classic news versus entertainment dichotomies and extend to online communication. Given that emerging adults in many cultures are permanently connected to the digital world (Vorderer, Krömer, & Schneider, 2016), meaningful and moving forms of social media entertainment (Trepte & Oliver, 2018) are

particularly relevant to link political entertainment and political engagement online (Holbert, Weinmann, & Robinson, 2018).

Though political identity formation is an important task for emerging adults all over the world, cultural norms play a crucial role in shaping identity (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Schwartz, Donnellan, Ravert, Luyckx, & Zamboanga, 2012). For instance, cultural norms influence individuals' self-regulation (Gelfand et al., 2011), and the particularities of political systems and media landscapes may contribute to individual-level constraints. Besides, cultural values and norms may be reflected in entertainment messages that may distinctly contribute to the formation of political identities and engagement in each culture. Additionally, although entertainment media have transnational elements, they vary just as much concerning national and local media products (Odağ, 2021; Odağ & Hanke, 2019). Furthermore, individuals' political engagement highly depends on the political system they live in (Barrett & Zani, 2015). Thus, comparisons across political systems may reveal different relations between media use and political engagement.

Our reasoning follows these ideas: First, emerging adults consume entertainment media, vary in their political engagement, and have not yet solidified their political identities. Second, given the recent evidence for political entertainment effects, we argue that media entertainment can contribute to emerging adults' political identity and engagement. Third, local cultural and political norms and values are entangled with political systems and using entertainment media content within these systems. As little is known about how these concepts interplay, we qualitatively explore what role media entertainment plays in emerging adults' political identity and engagement across cultures.

Political Identity and Engagement in Emerging Adulthood

Political identity describes "the extent that being a politically interested and involved person is important to one's core self" and "the development of personally meaningful political commitments" (Porter, 2013, p. 241). This development begins in adolescence (Arnett, 2004; Erikson, 1968) and takes place most intensely during *emerging adulthood*—the phase between adolescence and adulthood at the age of 18–29 years (Jensen & Arnett, 2012). To understand how political identity—a specific domain of personal identity— is formed, how it is linked to political engagement, and how it interfaces with media entertainment, a brief look at achieving personal identity is helpful. *Personal* or *ego identity* (Erikson, 1968) deals with all aspects of the self on the individual level, such as goals, values, beliefs, self-evaluations, and individual-level processes. Moreover, it pays attention to the psychosocial development of identity (Vignoles, Schwartz, & Luyckx, 2011). Drawing on Erikson's (1968) ideas, the status of identity achievement can be determined via two criteria: exploration and commitment (Kroger & Marcia, 2011). Exploration refers "to some period of re-thinking, sorting through, and trying out various roles and life plans" and is prevalent during emerging adulthood when "choosing among meaningful alternatives" (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, p. 33) is a relevant life task. Commitment refers to "the degree of personal investment the individual expressed in a course of action or belief" (Kroger & Marcia, 2011, pp. 33–34).

Whereas political identity is related to individuals' viewpoints on politics as a domain of their self-concept, *political engagement* refers to their actual affective, cognitive, and behavioral involvement "with political institutions, processes and decision-making" (Barrett & Zani, 2015, p. 4). This includes conventional

(e.g., voting, party membership) and less conventional participation (e.g., protesting, political blogging, sharing via SNS), psychological engagement (e.g., following current political affairs using media), and even political disengagement (Lannegrand-Willems, Chevrier, Perchec, & Carrizales, 2018). Emerging adults are less likely to be traditionally politically engaged, but they may lean toward alternate forms of engagement (Núñez & Flanagan, 2016). All these forms of political engagement and identity are closely linked and potentially mutually reinforcing (Lannegrand-Willems et al., 2018).

Although media, along with parents, peers, and educators (Lloyd, 2002), are crucial for identity development (Brown, 2006; Davis, Charmaraman, & Weinstein, 2020), the role of (entertainment) media in *political* identity development has not been thus far in the center of scholarly attention (Amnå, 2012). This is surprising as emerging adults spend more time using media, mainly for entertainment, than on any other activity to facilitate key developmental processes such as identity formation (Coyne, Padilla-Walker, & Howard, 2016). This lack of research could be explained by the way media entertainment has been viewed traditionally: as diametrically opposite to political information and purely hedonic. Both views have been challenged in recent research (Schneider et al., 2021).

Political Entertainment Experiences

Distinguishing entertainment and information as mutually exclusive categories is not fruitful (Dohle & Vowe, 2014). On the one hand, hybrid formats ("infotainment") combine entertaining elements with political information (e.g., political satire) and entertainment formats (e.g., fictional TV series) include politically relevant messages with real-life implications (Holbert, 2005). On the other hand, media users can simultaneously perceive and experience any type of media content as politically relevant *and* entertaining (Dohle & Vowe, 2014). Therefore, media content can be interpreted according to its *potential to be perceived as politically relevant* and its *potential to be perceived as entertaining* (Dohle & Vowe, 2014). Political entertainment experiences focus on those media experiences that are perceived as entertaining but also as more or less political. This refers to political talk shows (Roth, Weinmann, Schneider, Hopp, & Vorderer, 2014) but also to less obvious examples like *The Simpsons* (Holbert, 2005). Additionally, political entertainment includes traditional mass media and interactive forms of online media. Through this lens, using social media can be entertaining (Dale et al., 2020; Reinecke et al., 2014; Trepte & Oliver, 2018) and our permanent connectedness to the digital world seems particularly relevant to interface political entertainment and engagement online (Holbert et al., 2018).

Furthermore, although traditional understandings of media entertainment as merely pleasurable have dominated previous research (Vorderer, Klimmt, & Ritterfeld, 2004), more recent approaches go beyond this hedonic focus by addressing satisfying intrinsic needs, feelings of being moved, meaningfulness, self-transcendence, and inspiration (Oliver et al., 2018). These eudaimonic entertainment experiences can have beneficial effects on politically relevant outcomes, such as information processing, knowledge, and engagement (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014; Knop-Huelss, Rieger, & Schneider, 2020; Schneider, Weinmann, Roth, Knop, & Vorderer, 2016).

As they lower the threshold of engaging with politics, political entertainment experiences across media channels can be particularly useful in reducing the gap between politically uninterested and already

highly engaged users (Andersen, 2019; Valeriani & Vaccari, 2016). Such effects may also translate to political identity. However, most entertainment and media effects research so far has concentrated on the United States and Western Europe (Kim & Eom, 2020; Odağ, 2021; Odağ & Hanke, 2019). Thus, cross-cultural perspectives may deepen our understanding of the link between media entertainment and political identity and engagement, thereby gaining knowledge about cultural differences and similarities.

The Role of Culture in Political Identity, Engagement, and Entertainment

Although identity development is an important task for young adults all over the world, differences across cultures have been reported (Crocetti, Schwartz, Fermani, Klimstra, & Meeus, 2012). On a micro level, these differences trace back to variations in tightness-looseness social sanctioning (Gelfand et al., 2011), independent versus interdependent social orientation (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and analytic versus holistic cognitive style (Nisbett, Peng, Choi, & Norenzayan, 2001). For instance, the multilevel theory of cultural tightness-looseness distinguishes cultures according to their strength of norms and sanctioning of deviant behavior (Gelfand et al., 2011): Stronger (or weaker) social restrictions on the society level (e.g., expressed as constraints across various day-to-day social situations) translate to the level of individuals' self-regulation (Gelfand et al., 2011). Additionally, on meso and macro levels, parental, religious, political, and media influences fluctuate between countries (Economist Intelligence Unit [EIU], 2020; Freedom House, 2020; Newman, Fletcher, Schulz, Andı, & Nielsen, 2020). Cultural differences in freedom of the press and media trust can impact media use (Newman et al., 2020). Moreover, individuals' participation in political decision-making processes highly depends on macro-level factors such as political culture, longevity of democratic tradition, opportunities for political participation, and the electoral system (Barrett & Zani, 2015), all of which likely lead to cross-cultural differences in engagement.

In addition to political contexts' cross-cultural impact, emerging adults across many cultures grow up in a globalized and media-saturated world (Coyne et al., 2016; Jensen & Arnett, 2012). On the one hand, cross-cultural contact occurs not only through travel, education, and migration but also through exchanging media products where "media markets cater to cultural values/needs by producing shared cultural appeal" (Odağ & Hanke, 2019, p. 177). On the other hand, global mediated environments blur the lines between social and mass media. They offer emerging adults alternative ways of life, role models, and social and cultural values, which can be used as resources for exploring and consolidating identity via entertainment media and indirectly via conversations with peers about such content (Brown, 2006; Coyne et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2020; Jensen & Arnett, 2012). Emerging adults are open to new ideas and actions (Jensen & Arnett, 2012), involving the risk that they do not commit to societally relevant causes. Conversely, this holds great potential when they use and act on this openness for alternative values. For example, "when such openness is combined with worldwide media access new community and civic movements may arise" (Jensen & Arnett, 2012, p. 485).

In general, but particularly from a cross-cultural perspective, we know little about how political identity, political engagement, and entertainment media use are related. Thus, this qualitative study explores these relationships across five countries varying in tightness, political systems, and media freedom. We aim at creating a finer-grained theory of potential relationships between context variables, entertainment media use, processes of political identity exploration, and political identity commitment.

Method

Participants and Interview Guides

To explore the link between media entertainment and political identity formation cross-culturally, we conducted 55 semistructured interviews among 10–15 emerging adults (ages 18–29) in five countries: Croatia, Germany, South Korea, the Philippines, and Turkey (see Table 1 for details).[3] We used purposeful and snowball sampling strategies to get hold of homogeneous samples of emerging adults (Jensen & Arnett, 2012), including only students between 18 and 29 years old. Interviewees were asked to put us in touch with potential participants. Although the resulting samples are not representative of larger populations, their information-richness provides analytical insight for theory-building (see the difference between statistical and analytic generalization; Maxwell, 2021). Another advantage of purposefully sampling is the comparability across countries (including almost exclusively students between 18 and 29 years old). Data saturation was considered to determine the sample sizes (Kuzel, 1992).

Table 1. Overview of Participants and Interviews per Country.

Country	No. of participants	Languages used in interviews	Dates of data collection	Age (range, mean)	Gender
Croatia	10	Croatian (8), English (2)	May/October 2019	18–25 (21.5)	F = 5, M = 5
Germany	10	German	June/July 2018	20–27 (22.9)	F = 5, M = 5
South Korea	10	South Korean	December 2019– May 2020	19–29 (23.9)	F = 5, M = 5
The Philippines	10	Filipino and English	May–September 2019	19–27 (23.2)	F = 5, M = 5
Turkey	15	Turkish	July/August 2019	19–24 (20.7)	F = 10, M = 5

Note. F = Female, M = Male. All participants were students, except for Croatia, where two had a job. All participants in the Croatian sample attended higher education institutions with English as the official language of instruction; they could choose between Croatian and English for the interviews.

Selected countries varied on the cultural tightness-looseness continuum (Uz, 2015): Turkey represented the tightest culture with strong social norms and little tolerance for deviation. Germany represented the loosest culture in our sample with relatively weak social norms and a strong tolerance for deviance from social norms. South Korea, the Philippines, and Croatia fell between these two endpoints on the tightness-looseness continuum. See Table 2 for an overview of the countries and their differences (including tightness scores, political culture, and freedom).

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[3] Ethics approval was obtained from the Research Ethics and Governance Committee at authors' university. Participants gave their informed consent and received both written and verbal information about the study. They could also ask questions. All personally identifiable information was removed from the data reports.

Table 2. Overview of Cultural Scores.

Country	Tightness score[1]	Political context[2]	Freedom score[3]	Political position of government
Turkey	12.5	hybrid regime (4.09), low political culture (5.00), low pol. participation (5.00)	32 (unfree)	right-wing
South Korea	20.1	flawed democracy (8.00), high political culture (7.50), high pol. participation (7.22)	83 (free)	center to center-left
The Philippines	31.5	flawed democracy (6.64), low political culture (4.38), high pol. participation (7.22)	59 (moderately free)	center-left to left-wing
Croatia	55	flawed democracy (6.57), low political culture (5.00), low pol. participation (5.56)	85 (free)	center-right
Germany	82.9	full democracy (8.68), high political culture (7.50), high pol. participation (8.33)	94 (free)	center-right

[1] based on Uz (2015, scale: 0–100, 0 = very tight, 100 = very loose);
[2] based on Democracy Index 2019 (scale: 0–10, EIU, 2020);
[3] Freedom House 2020 (scale: 1–100)

Drawing on and extending the identity status interview (Marcia & Archer, 1993), participants were asked about their media consumption, political and civic engagement, political interests, sociopolitical attitudes, and identity formation. Interviews were conducted in the participants' native languages by a native speaker, digitally recorded, and transcribed by native speakers of the respective languages. The interview guideline was first used in Germany and then in all countries.[4]

Data Analysis

In an iterative process based on the interviews, we deductively and inductively developed a cross-cultural coding scheme (see Figure 1). Our coding scheme during the deductive stage was structured around elementary topics representing our research problem and interview questions. To enhance this preliminary version, we employed a more inductive approach, combining an initial line-by-line with a subsequent selective coding strategy (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We condensed the narrow codes resulting from the line-by-line reading into selective codes with a higher level of abstraction through constant comparison across interviewees. Native coders ensured that the data for each country were understood thoroughly during this stage. Coders compiled their detailed information into English-language codes, resulting in a detailed and rich refinement of the initial coding scheme. Consensus meetings were carried out within the team to ensure that coding and data were read consistently across coders and countries (Cascio, Lee, Vaudrin, & Freedman,

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[4] Available via https://osf.io/6bz9f/

2019; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The final coding scheme constituted the main result of the current study, allowing for exploratory comparisons across countries.
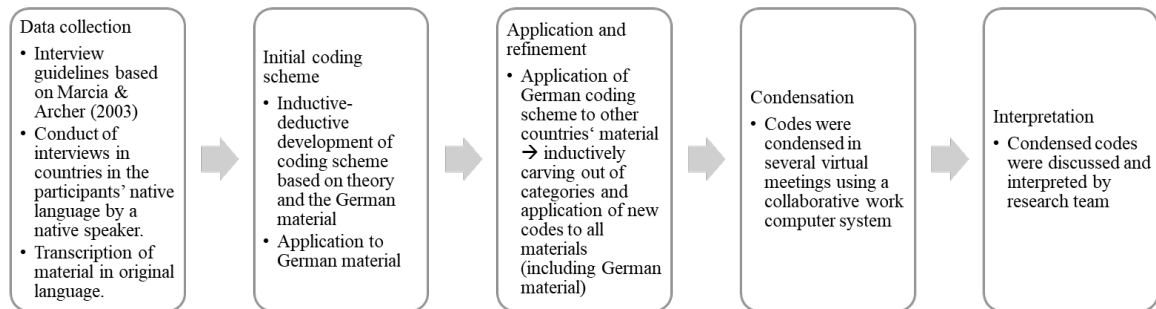
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┌─────────────────┐   ┌─────────────────┐   ┌─────────────────┐   ┌─────────────────┐   ┌─────────────────┐
│ Data collection │   │ Initial coding  │   │ Application and │   │                 │   │                 │
│ • Interview     │   │ scheme          │   │ refinement      │   │                 │   │                 │
│   guidelines    │   │ • Inductive-    │   │ • Application of│   │ Condensation    │   │ Interpretation  │
│   based         │→  │   deductive     │→  │   German coding │→  │ • Codes were    │→  │ • Condensed     │
│   on Marcia &   │   │   development of│   │   scheme to     │   │   condensed in  │   │   codes were    │
│   Archer (2003) │   │   coding scheme │   │   other         │   │   several       │   │   discussed and │
│ • Conduct of    │   │   based on      │   │   countries'    │   │   virtual       │   │   interpreted by│
│   interviews in │   │   theory and the│   │   material      │   │   meetings using│   │   research team │
│   countries in  │   │   German        │   │   → inductively │   │   a             │   │                 │
│   the           │   │   material      │   │   carving out of│   │   collaborative │   │                 │
│   participants' │   │ • Application to│   │   categories and│   │   work          │   │                 │
│   native        │   │   German        │   │   application of│   │   computer      │   │                 │
│   language by a │   │   material      │   │   new codes to  │   │   system        │   │                 │
│   native        │   │                 │   │   all materials │   │                 │   │                 │
│   speaker.      │   │                 │   │   (including    │   │                 │   │                 │
│ • Transcription │   │                 │   │   German        │   │                 │   │                 │
│   of material in│   │                 │   │   material)     │   │                 │   │                 │
│   original      │   │                 │   │                 │   │                 │   │                 │
│   language.     │   │                 │   │                 │   │                 │   │                 │
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Figure 1. Data collection procedure, development, and application of the coding scheme.

Results

We first address our participants' views of media entertainment's role in political engagement and identity formation and then lay out findings on where in the media our participants came across political content, while further describing their attitudes toward it. We highlight topics that appeared across all countries in our sample but also point out and contextualize idiosyncrasies or country-specific topics.[5]

The Role of Media Entertainment in Political Engagement and Identity

We found a high level of universality concerning media entertainment's role in our participants' political engagement with various aspects mentioned across *all* countries. Some participants explicitly accentuated the *politically engaging effects of media entertainment*, referring to their experiences of entertainment media as *facilitators of political engagement* (e.g., in the context of social movements) [P1–3; SK1–2]. In general, our participants described entertainment media as *sources for learning about socially relevant issues* (e.g., information sources and motivators to seek more information) [G10a–11, P4–5, C26, C28, SK3–5, T17]. Specifically, participants pointed out media entertainment's role in agenda-setting and raising awareness of social issues [G11, P9–10, C35, SK6]. Furthermore, they stressed media entertainment's potential for broadening one's horizon, both intentionally and accidentally [G12, P6–7, C36, SK7–9]. They acknowledged that fictional stories could depict complex topics in a simplified manner, thereby making it easier for people to understand or become aware of social problems [G13, P9, C37, SK10–12]. Apart from this cognitive learning perspective, media entertainment was also said to support emotional engagement and empathy [G14, P5–6, P8, C33, SK13], highlighting affective reactions in the relationship between entertainment and political engagement (Bartsch & Schneider, 2014).

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[5] Because of space limitations, full quotes are presented on https://osf.io/6bz9f/; we reference these quotes by using IDs in brackets.

Learning about socially relevant issues can be seen as indicative of identity *exploration* in that participants pointed out using media entertainment to examine meaningful identity alternatives [P10–12, SK14]. Concerning *commitment* indicators, participants saw media as amplifying their views, in that exposure to both affirming and opposing views confirmed their own opinions [G15–16, P14–15, C37, SK15–17].

Whereas our participants across countries almost unanimously confirmed media entertainment's relevance for political identity formation, a few interviewees deviated from this pattern: Some participants from Croatia and Turkey explicitly mentioned a *lacking relation between entertainment and political engagement* [C9, C13], with some explicitly rejecting this relationship [T5–6]. Apart from these definitive references, other repeatedly mentioned topics suggested indirect effects, which we report in more detail below.

Across all countries, participants reported frequently stumbling on political content when using media (e.g., in music, fictional formats such as series, movies, or books; or fact-oriented formats such as newspapers or news portals, television, and podcasts). However, they also came across it on social media where media categories intermingle and where other users' posts can be entertaining.

Our participants expressed *positive views* toward political content in the media across all countries. They considered political content to be thought-provoking, provide insights, present different points of view, and increase empathy [G6, G17, P9–11, C33, C38–39, SK7, SK9]. When entertainment and politics were mixed, participants reported that this made entertainment more enjoyable, politics more interesting [T2], and generally raised awareness of important issues [T4]. In South Korea, the Philippines, and Croatia, participants said that the mix of politics and entertainment was engaging, even inducing change [P9, P13, C1–2, SK18]. The importance of keeping the balance between politics and entertainment was mentioned by participants from all countries except those from the Philippines and Croatia: introducing political issues in entertaining media was considered acceptable unless they harmed entertainment experiences [C3–4, G7, SK19–20]. In Turkey, participants expressed that they liked to see political content only wrapped up in entertaining content [T2, T4]. They also evaluated social media as better sources of unbiased political information, as compared with most biased media in governmental hands [T12].

Negative attitudes toward political content in the media were equally present across all countries, reflecting various aspects and reasons. Participants spoke about possibly decreasing enjoyment when political issues appeared in primarily entertaining media content, expressing worries about the narrative's appeal and overburdening, even stressful, experiences. Participants were concerned that entertainment should not mix in politics as "it was not their place" (Croatia [C5–6]) and did not appreciate being forced to think about issues (South Korea [SK21], Turkey [T5]), especially with views too different from their own (the Philippines [P21]) and being exclusionary of stigmatized social groups (Turkey [T1]). Interviewees expressed fears of being "brainwashed" (South Korea [SK22], Croatia [C7–8], Turkey [T6]) and emotionally lured into governmentally skewed views (Turkey [T7]).

Participants were also *skeptical* about the lacking clear distinction between entertainment and other media again providing various reasons. In South Korea, the participants' skepticism pertained to negative portrayals of gender (e.g., marginalized roles of females [SK23]), whereas in the Philippines it connected with the neglect of specific topics [P16–18]. Participants from Turkey were concerned about the current

political situation and rejected any topics relating to it [T6], expressing worry about biased governmental propaganda [T8] and overly patriotic or propagandistic reporting [T7, T21]. Interviewees in Turkey expressed that, despite their liking of active discussions of politics in entertainment media, they also felt demoralized by the same discussions, as they gave very little hope for political improvement in the country [T11]. The participants in Germany and the Philippines stated the importance of critically evaluating media content as sources of information, while at the same time acknowledging that media effects often occurred on an unconscious level, making it difficult to uphold critical reflection [G1, P14–15]. Moreover, in Turkey, the Philippines, and Germany, participants feared the negative effects of a lacking distinction between entertainment and other media in terms of echo chambers and fake news [G1, G14; P14–15, P18; T9–10]. This corresponds to concerns expressed by all participants about strong subliminal media effects [G14, G18; P14]. Some participants in South Korea and Germany also worried that issues were inaccurately depicted, ignored, or trivialized, and stereotypical views perpetuated (e.g., women in action movies; environmental pollution in older films, etc.) [G2–3, SK22–23]. Filipino participants remarked that media are used to market certain politicians or advertise political interests [P19–21]. Participants from Croatia sometimes also voiced a "neutral" or ambivalent position toward political content by reporting taking notice without attaching any importance to it [C9–14].

Taken together, these findings already show that hybrid media formats where entertainment and information are intermingled are part of our participants' day-to-day realities. Furthermore, accounting for the audience's perceptions emphasizes the fruitfulness of focusing on experiences that are perceived as entertaining *and* political (Dohle & Vowe, 2014). Our participants' *positive* attitudes toward political content in entertainment media all highlight the potential of identity exploration through such media content as our participants learned about social issues and other people's perspectives and thus consider various possibilities for shaping their sociopolitical lives. Our results suggest a high level of universality in this regard. However, idiosyncrasies emerged in the way our participants highlighted *negative* or *skeptical* attitudes toward political media content. These idiosyncrasies can be understood best by accounting for the specific political and cultural contexts of our samples. We present country-specific findings using the concept of tightness-looseness but also employing aspects of political culture or freedom of the press (EIU, 2020; Freedom House, 2020) as well as levels of trust in both traditional and social media (Newman et al., 2020).

Contextualizing Cultural Differences

Turkey

Participants from Turkey voiced a pronounced dislike of governmental propaganda [T7–8, T21], aggressive discussions [T5], fake news [T9–10], and exclusionary rhetoric against stigmatized groups [T1, T3], especially on social media, and preferred separating entertainment from politics. Many favored using entertainment media expressly for the sake of pleasure [T13–16], and some preferred politics only in disguise [T2, T4]. These findings make sense because Turkey was our tightest culture, representing an autocratic, unfree political context (EIU, 2020; Freedom House, 2020; see Table 2). Ever since the religious-conservative AKP (Justice and Development Party) took power in 2002 and heavily censored journalists and mainstream media, social media have gained significance as influential forces in alternative journalism, providing unbiased and difficult-to-obtain information (Akser & McCollum, 2019). Albeit participants

generally approved of using social media as alternative political discussion sources [T12, T18], they also expressed frustration surrounding political content [T5–7]. Although they explicitly used media content for information and political exploration [T17] and social media as response outlets vis-à-vis political repression [T18], they also expressed their desire to distance themselves from Turkish politics in their media diet [T5–6, T14, T21]. Their own life experiences, educational contexts, and personal role models (e.g., peers, parents, or teachers) thus played larger roles in their political engagement and commitment than any media [T19–20]. Our sample clearly expressed political apathy and hopelessness surrounding politics in Turkey [T3, T5–7, T11], reminiscent of lacking political interest in the larger population of youth in the country (Önalan, 2019; Yentürk & Bahçeci, 2014). In sum, participants from Turkey can be described as *socially engaged media users who currently reject Turkish politics and are highly suspicious of biased governmental political views in entertainment media*.

South Korea

Our South Korean participants can be described as *collectivist media users* who were highly interested in politics, particularly concerning the South and North Korean political situation [SK14, SK24–25]. However, participants also reflected on communal political issues and inequality concerns through active exploration and commitment [SK14–15, SK17]. As citizens of a collective and interdependent country (Grossmann & Na, 2014), South Koreans were concerned with themes and issues at the national group level (e.g., Korean wars, gender equality) [SK24–26]. The previously pointed out skepticism toward and dislike of political entertainment pertained mostly to concerns about the inadequate or negative depictions of topics and about being manipulated through the incorporation of political messages within entertaining contexts [SK22, SK27]. These concerns can be explained by a history of governmental control of media messages during the Korean War and military dictatorship resulting in present low levels of media trust (Newman et al., 2020). The dislike of political entertainment can also be related to the lacking optimal balance between meaningfulness and fun [SK4, SK20]. The balance may be sensitive particularly in SK because it may reflect harmony and moderation indicative of holistic thinking and interdependence, both of which are important cultural dimensions for South Korea (Grossmann & Na, 2014; Kim, Seo, Yu, & Neuendorf, 2014). Furthermore, South Korea has a highly political culture and was ranked 23rd in the 2019 Democracy Index (EIU, 2020; the highest score in Asian countries) and represents an extremely well-connected country with the highest Internet penetration rates among Asian countries as of 2020 (Waldeck, 2020).

The Philippines

Filipino participants used social media for political awareness and engagement [P3–7, P11, P15]. However, although they were *politically interested media users who used social media for political activity*, they did so *through a critical lens*. They expressed an awareness of biases, fake news, and issues being "watered down" in social media [P16–18]. Such a critical stance on social media may be a reflection of generally low levels of trust in news and media associated with the current administration's assault on political opposition, including the Philippine press (Newman et al., 2020), and a general decline in the country's quality of democracy (EIU, 2020). Furthermore, Philippine politics has been described as significantly influenced by "patronage and fandom" (Pertierra, 2016) as well-known figures from media, sports, or entertainment either run for office or are associated with officeholders. Consequently, Philippine media have also been seen as a tool to promote such

"celebrity politics" (David & Atun, 2015), and the wariness toward the mix of entertainment and political issues is not surprising. Additionally, the participants' media use and political engagement were strongly inspired by the media use of individuals within their social networks [P3, P5–6, P22–23]. This influence of collective ties on both media consumption and political activity is consistent with previous research that demonstrated (1) the Filipinos' desire to be connected with their social networks and (2) Filipinos' avid social media use. Filipinos consistently spend high (if not the highest) amounts of hours online (DataReportal, 2020). Especially, connecting with friends and family members was one of the main reasons for Filipinos' high Internet and social media activity (We Are Social, 2011).

Croatia

        Participants from Croatia seemed disenchanted with and disinterested in politics [C15–21] and could be described as *political skeptics* who distrust political parties or who are in a general state of "democratic malaise" (EIU, 2020). Democracy Index (EIU, 2020) described a steady decrease in governmental functioning in Croatia (a compound score consisting of transparency, accountability, and corruption) and declining trust in political processes. This was borne out in our results through expressed low political self-efficacy among participants from Croatia [C22–25]. Our study participants are digital natives and belong to the first generation of Croatian citizens to have lived entirely in a multiparty (flawed) democracy. As such, they are a unique population of media users and political actors. Participants in Croatia used media for information and entertainment in almost equal measure and used entertainment media to become better informed about important topics and for self-improvement as much as for relaxation and communication of shared interests with others [C26–28].

        Participants from Croatia reported a high level of political engagement only in the most traditional form: voting. Although most participants viewed politics as unpleasant and irrelevant in their lives presently, they described a strong sense of duty to vote, even when voting was connected to low political self-efficacy [C23, C29]. This sense of obligation may be an individual-level outcome of living in what Uz (2015) described as a moderately tight culture. About political identity development, participants from Croatia reported relatively high levels of exploration through entertainment media, albeit with low behavioral and moderate emotional engagement or commitment [C30–32]. Contrary to low political engagement, participants showed high civic activity (e.g., volunteering in the community, donating to charities), frequently facilitated through media [C33–34]. This type of civic-mindedness and collectivist orientation was highly praised in the earlier, single-party political system.

Germany[6]

        Finally, in Germany, the loosest culture in our study, participants turned out to be *rational information-seekers* considering all options, actively using media to build informed opinions, and showing great variety in media use for exploration [G4, G9, G10b]. Participants from Germany showed a

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[6] After inspecting the initial German interviews, we decided to add specific questions about social media use to the interview guidelines for the remaining countries. Thus, comparisons with the German sample are not possible.

comparatively high level of media literacy and self-reflexivity about their media use [G4, G14] and—although differing in the strength of political interest—all actively voted in major elections, consistent with Germany's high rank in the Democracy Index and its relatively high levels of political participation (EIU, 2020). Tolerance or even encouragement of discussion between people with deviating opinions is one of the characteristics of more loose cultures such as Germany and could therefore explain why participants openly expressed displeasure about political content that did not match their views [G5a–c]. Additionally, participants also articulated concerns about careless portrayals of sensitive issues that might negatively influence other people's still-unformed views of those same issues [G3]. These reactions indicate preexisting political views that elicit negative reactions or counterarguments to divergent opinions in media content. According to the participants, the entertainment factor of media content can be greatly reduced because of this cognitive engagement [G7, G5b]. Participants from Germany were also self-critical by pointing out the distracting potential of entertainment in that excessive television consumption took both time and mental capacity away from political engagement [G8a–8b]. This corresponds to the time displacement hypothesis (i.e., media use prevents people from engaging in civic activities) and supports recent data suggesting that most German youth feel that they are often wasting time on the Internet (Medienpädagogischer Forschungsverbund Südwest, 2020).

General Discussion

Emerging adulthood is a critical time for forming and consolidating a political identity and becoming politically engaged (Núñez & Flanagan, 2016), largely dependent on cultural norms, values, and beliefs (Arnett, 2004). In a media-saturated and globalized world, emerging adults use media to seek and find information that helps explore their political identities, challenge their worldviews, and reinforce already existing opinions. They may pursue such goals purposefully but also encounter new insights incidentally. What role does media entertainment play in these political identity processes across cultures? Our study's contributions to this question are multifold. Our interviews showed that, on the one hand, media entertainment played a similarly important role in identity development for participants across five countries. The interviewees described entertainment media as sources for raising awareness of and learning about important political issues through cognitive and emotional engagement. They reported intentional and incidental exposure to political topics in entertainment media, leading to identity explorations (e.g., broadening their horizons concerning different viewpoints, experiencing meaning in life) and commitments (e.g., confirming and amplifying their existing beliefs). These (politically) engaging effects of entertainment media resonate with the idea of a global media culture, mainly driven by global media products and social media (Coyne et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2020; Jensen & Arnett, 2012). Particularly, political identity explorations are closely linked to meaningful entertainment experiences (Oliver et al., 2018). However, hedonic experiences may still open a gateway to eudaimonic entertainment.

On the other hand, despite these near-universal aspects, we found idiosyncrasies among countries concerning tightness-looseness, political culture, and media freedom. For instance, within our sample, Croatia represents a mildly tight culture (Uz, 2015) and a young, flawed democracy (EIU, 2020) with low belief in a functioning government, low media trust, and a high level of corruption and influence of actors outside of the elected public representatives in the democratic political processes (EIU, 2020; Transparency International, 2020). In such a context, our interviewees were motivated to separate entertainment consumption from political

engagement, especially when it was unclear whether the results of engagement were desirable. Similar findings applied to the Turkish context, where the degree of repression and censorship is even higher than in Croatia (Freedom House, 2020). Previous research has shown that political identities in Turkey are shaped especially during adolescence (Önalan, 2019), constituting a time in which, in the case of our participants in Turkey, the AKP government was already in power. Within this context, actively separating entertainment from political engagement seemed reasonable and reflected a rejective stance toward repressive political influences, along with an embracing stance toward entertainment unfiltered by government influences. Findings from the Philippine participants can likewise be regarded against this backdrop, especially concerns over celebrity politics (David & Atun, 2015). In contrast, in countries such as Germany and South Korea, with longer-functioning democracies and higher political cultures, this wish for separating entertainment from politics was less pronounced among our participants or only connected to concerns that political elements may reduce entertaining experiences. These findings suggest that the uses and effects of political entertainment are susceptible to influences of the specific political climate (e.g., when media users in less democratic regimes suspect political propaganda disguised as entertainment) and cultural tightness but warrant additional support from future cross-cultural large-scale studies.

Furthermore, media entertainment was equally characterized by pleasure and meaningfulness, although hedonic experiences on their own were rarely linked to political identity formation. Moreover, although many participants did not directly link entertainment to their political engagement, they acknowledged that it informs about politics, provokes thoughts, and brings together like-minded people. Accordingly, across our five countries, entertainment media helped our interviewees explore alternative political identities and affirm already established values—thus playing an important role in political engagement in various cultural contexts. Interestingly, even in less democratic and tighter cultures, especially eudaimonic entertainment media may provide new and more subtle pathways for identity exploration, thereby perhaps eluding governmental control or societal sanctioning.

Although traditional forms of political entertainment media such as satire or movies had their place in our participants' daily media use, predominantly using social media as entertainment highlights a research gap. As entertainment scholars have just begun to explore entertaining online communication (Dale et al., 2020; Reinecke et al., 2014; Trepte & Oliver, 2018), little is known about the consequences on political identity and engagement. However, as social media use is crucial for emerging adults around the globe (Coyne et al., 2016; Davis et al., 2020; Jensen & Arnett, 2012), future endeavors are necessary to examine online entertainment use and its political consequences. Particularly in online environments, incidental exposure to political content while consuming entertainment media might be prevalent and—combined with meaningful entertainment experiences—a promising way to reach politically less interested emerging adults and support their identity explorations.

With all these contributions in mind, some limitations of our study have to be mentioned. As with most qualitative approaches, our focus was exploratory and rested on small, purposive samples. We primarily aimed at creating cross-cultural insights into how media entertainment relates to political identity development. Although this approach is powerful in developing theory, future research is needed to test our interpretations with larger and more representative samples.

Despite our explicit aim at establishing comparative samples across countries and purposefully sampling exclusively students in a specific age range, we could not reach comparability in all respects. For example, women were overrepresented in the sample from Turkey, whereas in the other samples the gender ratio was balanced. In Croatia, we included two interviewees who had a job. Although all these participants still represented emerging adults, such shortcomings in terms of comparability (owed to our purposeful snowball sampling strategy) should be remedied in future studies.

Our cross-cultural approach was also challenging in that large amounts of qualitative data were coded inductively, which allowed us to carve out idiosyncrasies but simultaneously limited comparability across countries. Our inductive approach was important for the current study, especially because of its highly exploratory nature. More structured comparative approaches like content analysis could be used in future studies.

Cross-cultural research has a predominantly quantitative tradition. Most qualitative studies in this area are not, strictly speaking, cross-cultural, but cultural, drawing out cultural specifics of single countries rather than comparing them across countries (Matsumoto & Juang, 2017). This might relate to the feasibility of carrying out in-depth qualitative analyses on larger corpora of verbal material: doing so based on a single country is already difficult to accomplish; with numerous countries, this is not only very challenging, but the existing methodological guidelines are not straightforward. We, therefore, developed our specific comparative strategy for processing our interview data and combined the comparative logic of cross-cultural research with the in-depth exploratory logic of qualitative studies. Such approaches are highly rare and require methodological refinement.

Drawing on cross-cultural tightness-looseness data (Uz, 2015), we selected countries to represent various points on the tightness-looseness continuum and enriched our interpretations using global data on political culture and media systems (EIU, 2020; Freedom House, 2020; Newman et al., 2020). One limitation is that the country-specific scores were built on data collections at different levels of analysis (expert ratings—Democracy Index: EIU, 2020; political culture: Freedom House, 2020; and surveys—news media use: Newman et al., 2020; tightness: Uz, 2015). These evaluations might not align with our interviewees' subjective perceptions, and we did not collect data on ethnic identity to delve deeper into their culture-specific interpretations. Thus, our study does not systematically account for the link between macro-level country data and micro-level perceptions of our interviewees. Whereas quantitative cross-cultural researchers recommend multilevel approaches for studying macro- and micro-level interactions (Berry, Poortinga, Breugelmans, Chasiotis, & Sam, 2011), in qualitative studies, no strict guidelines exist. Thus, our speculative interpretation should be addressed more rigorously in future studies.

To conclude, despite its shortcomings, our study is the first that cross-culturally examined the link between media entertainment and political identity. It showed that media entertainment is perceived globally as a crucial gateway to political engagement, paving the way for even politically disengaged individuals to explore and commit to political issues. At the same time, macro-level degrees of political freedom and democracy influence this path. In countries with higher degrees of repression and lower degrees of democracy, media entertainment's gateway to political identity development appears less constructive.

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