How phatic is political communication in social media?

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Abstract

This paper explores the role of phatic communication in political discourse on social media. We present a case study of German political communication on Instagram in the context of protests against antisemitism and the rise of right-wing extremism in Germany (October 2023 to April 2024). Focusing on nonargumentative posts, we annotate the data according to three categories: phatic, mobilizing, and informative. To assess the classification of phatic content, we compare human annotation with the performance of large language models (LLMs) in both zero-shot and few-shot classification settings. Inter-annotator agreement among human experts is moderate (Cohen's K = 0.62), highlighting the inherent ambiguity in identifying phatic communication. Among the models evaluated, a Mistral-based model achieves the best performance. Our findings suggest that while phatic elements are present in political discourse, the majority of posts serve mobilizing or informative functions. Our analysis illustrates, by way of example, that very complex annotations can only be performed by models with limited quality. Depending on the class and task, heterogeneous results are obtained

1 Introduction

The notion of phatic communion was introduced by Malinowski (1967) and describes language that is used exclusively to fulfill a social function and without conveying information: "Each utterance is an act serving the direct aim of binding hearer to speaker by a tie of some social sentiment or other". Phatic communication is omnipresent in social media, be it through status updates like "currently eating ice cream" or phatic photo sharing (Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen, 2020). Some even argue social media are phatic media, in which communication without content has taken precedence (Miller, 2008). This, according to Miller

(2017), has led to social media as environments based on "limited forms of expressive solidarity as opposed to an engaged, content-driven, dialogic public sphere".

Social networks are full of informal, nonargumentative texts. Phatic media, or technologies, help sustain relationships through pervasive but non-informational contact (Miller, 2008). The constant stream of communication generated by smartphones and the availability of social media encourages a type of communication that suggests a general sociability and affability without exchanging real information (Miller, 2017).

As many texts are informal and media have been labeled to be phatic, scholars debate the relevance of political communication in social media. Without doubt, the so-called micro-activism, slacktivism, or clicktivism has been studied extensively: More than 300 studies have used survey data to test the relationship between the use of digital media and offline engagement in civic and political life, such as voting, volunteering, and protesting (Boulianne, 2020). This impact was deduced from a statistical synthesis by Boulianne (2020). Critical voices have challenged "digital politics enthusiasts" and ask if political communication has become increasingly phatic and less dialogic (Miller, 2017).

Undoubtedly, phatic communication is prevalent in social media. But is it also prevalent in political communication in social media, as in new social movements or activist dicsourse? In this paper, we want to explore what the real amount of phatic communication is in political communication. We present a case study analyzing a German Instagram corpus structured by the hashtags #WirSind-Mehr and #NieWiederIstJetzt. In previous studies (Knierim and Heid, 2025; Knierim et al., 2025), argumentation in this discourse has been investigated. In this paper, we investigate a corpus of non-argumentative sentences, following the premise that they are more likely to be phatic. The con-

tributions of this paper are three-fold: First, we put forward annotation guidelines and present a dataset of potentially phatic texts in German. We compare the performance of few-shot and zero-shot-settings of two large language models on detecting phatic communication. Third, we demonstrate the distribution of phatic content in our dataset to quantify the amount of phatic communication in an example of political online discourse.

In this paper, we first introduce concepts by researchers that try to grasp phatic language in social media. We then describe the corpus compilation and annotation process. Then, the prompt design and classification task are described. Finally, we present the results: we first discuss the distribution of phatic language in our corpus. Then, we discuss the performance of large language models for this task.

2 Phatic communication in social media

Microposts and phatic posts are derivatives of phatic communication (Radovanovic and Ragnedda, 2012). Although they might not have information value (Malinowski, 1967), Radovanovic and Ragnedda (2012) argue that phatic posts do have semantic and social value for the interlocutors. Following Malinowski (1967), Radovanovic and Ragnedda (2012) identify functions of phatic communication: Firstly, phatic communication serves the purpose of "social upkeep". Secondly, phatic posts can signal the availabilty as a potential communication partner. Thirdly, phatic posts have a validation and recognition function to indicate recognition of one's interlocutor as a potential communicative partner.

Radovanovic and Ragnedda (2012) argue that modern-day micro posts have their origin in the human need for social upkeep. They related phatic posts to the phatic function introduced by Jakobson (1968). Jacobson introduced the five general functions of language, among them the phatic function (try to maintain in contact with the receiver). Radovanovic and Ragnedda (2012) describe phatic posts as "the phatic display of connected presence", where users engage through brief, informal messages. Following the authors, this signal also serves to validate the interlocutor as a potential communication partner.

The constant stream of communication created by smartphones and the availability of social media encourages a type of communication that suggests a general sociability and affability without exchanging real information (Miller, 2017). Miller (2017) challenges the notion that the ability of technology to connect people necessarily leads to an activism that involves dissent or resistance: Specifically, "political talk" would express convivial solidarity with others and have a function of social inclusion and recognition. Political communication in social media promotes phatic or idle talk, instead of working towards transformational political action (Miller, 2008). In this paper, we address this research question from a quantitative viewpoint by measuring the proportion of phatic communication in non-argumentative texts, following the premise that these are more likely to be phatic than argumentative posts.

Sarjanoja et al. (2013) conduct interviews to analyze the content of status updates on Facebook. They consider a sample of N=484 unique status updates, with participants rating how interesting they find them. The status updates are manually classified into topical categories, such as "small talk", "current events talk" and "complaining". Their findings indicate that Facebook status updates have strong elements of phatic communication and are used to increase one's social capital (Sarjanoja et al., 2013). Interestingly, participants found most status updates to be "boring". This demonstrates how phatic communication can be considered to be mundaine while still serving a social function. In a study about phatic photo sharing on Snapchat, Rettberg (2018) argues that the phatic connection between people is the key element, "often far more important than the content that is shared". This relates to the non-archival character of some platform affordances, translating to increased immediacy and a sense of shared experience (Rettberg, 2018).

Duffy and Ling (2020) study the sociality of news sharing on social media, conducting a survey of N=2000 participants and using data from 88 focus groups. Participants' motivations in sharing news include being part of a conversation, maintaining friendships, and contributing to a group. Not all news sharing is phatic according to the authors, as it can serve to warn, to inform or to advise. The authors argue that "sharing news online often conforms to the phatic, non-directional conversational gambit of Malinowski, and one focus-group participant said that people share the news because '[when] there is no topic to start a conversation, we start a conversation on the news'".

Phatic communication was initially studied in language but research has shown that it also occurs in photo-sharing (Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen, 2020) and even in the form of simple "likes" and reactions to others' posts (Radovanovic and Ragnedda, 2012). For example in snapchat, an ephemeral social media platform, phatic photo sharing is key to the success of the platform: Photosharing has been embedded in communicative media and supports the so-called "connected presence" (Rettberg, 2018; Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen, 2020). Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen (2020) argue that the omnipresence of the photo renders it "a kind of gesture suitable for opening and maintaining social exchange and bonds". In research on phatic visuals, a dichotomy is often drawn between traditional archival photographs typically single images stored in photo albums ephemeral contents, such as Instagram stories fade away (Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen, 2020; Rettberg, 2018). Another example of this is the young platform BeReal. On BeReal, ephemeral photos are shared directly with the community, without the availability of editing or curation of photos. The presented literature demonstrates how multifaceted the seemingly simple concept of phatic communication is.

3 Corpus compilation

With 37% of the population in Germany using Instagram (Newman et al., 2025), it is no surprise that Instagram reflects political moments of citizen engagement (Barbala, 2024). It is also a multimodal social network. As political messages are known to be communicated both in visuals and written language, it is especially important to study the platform (McNair, 2016). Politicians, for example, use Instagram visuals for strategic storytelling (Liebhart and Bernhardt, 2017). The Instagram caption is vital to this, as it is used to develop an engangig narrative (Towner and Muñoz, 2018).

We use an Instagram caption dataset structured by the German hashtags #WirSindMehr (we are more) and #NieWiederIstjetzt (never again is now). We build on work by Knierim and Heid (2025), who annotated the corpus for argument component detection. In their work, an argumentation model by Habernal and Gurevych (2017) was used. The model was developed and tested on user-generated web content, making it suitable for annotating social media discourse. The corpus includes both

argumentative and non-argumentative sentences and comprises 13468 posts, with a sample of 1200 posts labeled. The corpus is suitable for the research question considered in our study, as it fits into the paradigm of political talk in social media. In the following paragraphs, we shortly introduce the discourses.

The corpus was collected via "crowdtangle" and captures a timespan between 10/07/2023 and 03/31/2024. For this study, we only work with non-argumentative sentences from the corpus. This decision builds on the assumption that non-argumentative texts are more likely to be phatic. Like this, we investigate how many phatic messages we encounter within political discourse. The corpus contains 3013 non-argumentative sentences with 28432 tokens.

The upheavals against right-wing extremism (#WirSindMehr) and antisemitism (#NieWiederIst-Jetzt) provide a suitable dataset for investigating political communication. More than two million Germans protested using the slogans, while social media content on Instagram and Facebook was grammatized using the already mentioned hashtags. As hashtags enable and formalize actions and user activity, they can be used to trace user actions (Caliandro and Graham, 2020).

On January 10, 2023, the Correctiv research network uncovered a right-wing extremist meeting in Potsdam that called for the remigration of asylum seekers, foreigners with the right to stay in Germany and "non-assimilated citizens" in a secret plan (Correctiv 2024). Against the backdrop of the shift to the right in Germany and Europe in recent years, the unveiling of the secret meeting by the press had massive reverberations, with a total of two million people demonstrating in Germany in the following three months under the slogan #WirSindMehr.

Following the terrorist attack on Israel, the number of anti-semitic crimes committed in Germany increases by 240% by October 19, 2023. This leads to the formation of an alliance against anti-semitism. On 09.11.2023 at the commemoration of the 85. anniversary of the november progroms, the words "Nie Wieder Ist Jetzt" are used for the first time. Eva Szepsi, a Holocaust survivor, uses the

¹Crowdtangle was a legal way to extract data from Meta platforms until August 2024. However, the tool is no longer available. To extract data now, a highly formalised application process must be completed via the Meta API. The corpus can be released if legal review confirms its eligibility for public access.

phrase in the Bundestag on 31 January 2024 (Lelle, 2024).

In this paper, we investigate the following research questions: What is the amount of phatic communication in a dataset of non-argumentative sentences in German political posts? Which dimensions of the classes, phatic, mobilizing and informative, are most difficult to classify for LLMs? How do these difficulties compare between human annotation and LLM-based classification?

4 Annotation

4.1 Annotation guidelines

For the purpose of this study, non-argumentative texts were annotated and studied. From an inductive analysis of the texts, we derived three categories of non-argumentative sentences: Next to phatic texts, two other categories appear in the data: Sentences carrying information, such as reports from political events, or background information on persons or organizations. In addition, invitations or calls for engagement are common. This results in a three-fold classification of non-argumentative sentences, including phatic texts, informative texts, and mobilizing texts. Examples for all three categories are presented in Tab. 1. In this section, we outline the background and critera that informed our annotation guidelines, which served as the basis for the manual annotation process. The complete guidelines are displayed in the appendix (Tab. 6).

4.1.1 Phatic communication

Based on the literature review presented in section 2, we formulate the following guidelines for the phatic category:

- The text suggests a general sociability and affability without exchanging real information (Miller, 2017);
- The text evokes a sense of community (Miller, 2017) or a networked presence (Radovanovic and Ragnedda, 2012);
- The text evokes a sense of the feeling of a shared experience in real time (Rettberg, 2018);
- The text shares news to open a conversation (Duffy and Ling, 2020);
- The text can be uninteresting (Sarjanoja et al., 2013) or frivolous, boring and mundane (Rettberg, 2018).

4.1.2 Informative text

In the collection analyzed for this research, people often share information in their posts. While these sentences are non-argumentative and exist within a political context, they are neither phatic nor mobilizing.

- Background information on people, organizations, situations;
- Reports from political action or events;
- Announcements, specifications of time, place and date:
- Notes like: "No party symbols, but neutral banners are okay";
- · Short headlines.

4.1.3 Mobilizing text

More than two million people have protested under the slogans "Wir sind mehr" ("we are more") and "Nie Wieder Ist Jetzt" ("Never again is now"). Part of this mobilization process is present in the nonargumentative posts of the corpus. In literature, specific concepts like the call-to-action are researched (Siskou et al., 2022; Knierim et al., 2024; Achmann-Denkler et al., 2024), we adhere to the more general notion of mobilization. The guidelines to annotate this category capture the following phenomena:

- Slogans, short invitations;
- Indirect calls, can be linked to a condition;
- Direct calls: "Give @mention a like and comment on their post to help the cause.";
- Invitations such as: "All Magdeburgers are invited to participate in the commemoration of victims of antisemitism.".

4.2 Annotation results

Two trained annotators achieve a kappa score of 0.62, suggesting moderate agreement. As is visible in Fig.1, the informative class is the dominant class for both annotators (annotator A:54.7%, annotator B:65.1%), while the phatic and the mobilizing class appear less often. The smallest differences becomes apparent in the mobilization class that annotator A identifies in 14.9% of the classes, while annotator B identifies it in 16% of the texts. The

Label	Example
Phatic	"You were great, you were colorful, and your voices are important!"
	"A great gesture from Wiesbaden's urban society against attempts at division"
	"The most beautiful picture of the week definitely comes from Cologne <3"
	"And we would like to thank all colleagues from our organization and
	beyond who are fighting with us for an open and diverse democracy."
Informative	"The Eckernförde Round Table against the Right will meet on 12.03.2024
	- 7 p.m. in the AWO Family Centre & Citizens' Meeting Centre at the
	Rathausmarkt in Eckernförde."
	"There will be a rally and a vigil in Düsseldorf on Saturday and Sunday."
	"If you have flowers and grave candles, you are welcome to bring them,
	but it is not mandatory."
Mobilizing	"Come along and bring friends and family!"
	"Anyone who would like to make a contribution to the event is cordially
	invited to do so and should contact @mention (name@email.de) for coor-
	dination."
	"Show together with us: NEVER AGAIN IS NOW!"

Table 1: Examples for the phatic, informative and mobilizing class. (Translation from German by the authors.)

Possible labels	Example	Counts of disagree-
		ment
Mobilizing, Phatic	"So we'll see you tomorrow!"	86
Informative, Phatic	"On Sunday evening, around 6000 people lit up the	224
	banks of the Main during a chain of lights against	
	antisemitism."	
Mobilizing, Infor-	"17th of February 2024, 17:00 on the market square	94
mative	in Dessau!"	

Table 2: Ambiguous cases. (Translation from German by the authors.)

phatic class is identified in 30.5% of all texts (annotator 1) versus in 18.8% of all classes (annotator 2). Thus, the biggest discrepancy between the annotators lies in the phatic class. At the same time, we find that the biggest disagreement lies within the labeling of the phatic and the informative class (see Fig.1). Tab. 2 holds examples that are ambiguous.

5 Predicting phatic communication

5.1 Method

In order to explore the role of phatic communication in non-argumentative sentences quantitatively, we compare the performance of few-shot and zero-shot-settings of two large language models on detecting phatic communication. We are particularly interested in which dimensions of classes are most difficult to classify, and how these difficulties compare between manual annotation and LLM-based

classification. We define the task as a multiclass classification, classifying the text as either phatic, informative, or mobilizing. Importantly, we investigate phatic texts in political communication, not in Instagram posts in general. The texts were preprocessed in the following way: errors from scraping were removed. We additionally removed hashtags and emojis.

For our classification, it is of specific interest to compare human annotations with generated annotations. Following Ziems et al. (2024), large language models have the potential to transform the pipeline in interdisciplinary research settings, if they are equipped in assisting with labeling tasks like classifications. In this setting, human annotators achieve only moderate agreement and see differing amounts of phatic and informative content, while agreeing on mobilizing content (see: Fig. 1). Therefore, we are interested in whether

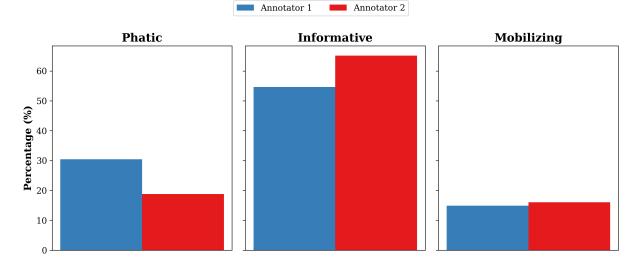


Figure 1: Distribution of informative, phatic and mobilizing sentences according to the annotations of annotator 1 and 2.

this ambiguity and uncertainty is reflected in model performance.

We test prompt drafts on every model and only present the best results. We follow the prompting guidelines provided by Ziems et al. (2024); Child et al. (2019) and give instructions after the context is provided. To reduce computational cost, we keep the prompt as short as possible with the GPT4omodel (temp=0), resulting prompts for both the zero- and fewshot settings that are different from those used with the open source model Mistral-7B-Instruct-v0.2 (Mistral) (Jiang et al., 2023). While we recognize that slight changes in prompt wording may affect the comparability of results across models, our goal is to showcase the best performance each model can achieve under optimal prompting conditions. Although Mistral had limited exposure to German during pretraining, we contrast its performance to that of GPT40, as it is an open-source, mid-sized open-weight LLM.

5.2 Results

We present the results (Tab.: 3, 4, 5) for each class, comparing in turn both LLMs (few-shot (FS) vs. zero-shot (ZS) setting). In section 6, we compare the performance of the models with the human annotators.

For the classification of the informative class, both models perform well in the few-shot setting, while Mistral outperforms the GPT-40 model (f1 score = 0.87 vs f1 score = 0.79). The Mistral model shows no improvement when applied in a few-shot setting (f1 score = 0.87). GPT-40 improves in the

few-shot-setting, not only for the informative class but in all classes. While the models showed satisfactory performance, both models struggle with lower recall, especially in zero-shot-settings. Compared to human annotators, we also see a difference within the identification of informative sentences, as annotator 2 is more inclusive with this category, identifying 1200 examples, while annotator 1 only identifies 1000 examples.

For the identification of the mobilizing class, GPT-40 performs best with an f1-score of 0.67 (see Tab. 5). For both zero-shot and few-shot settings, Mistral reaches high precision and lower recall, while GPT-40 has low precision but very high recall.

The models perform lowest for the detection of the phatic class, just like there is most ambiguity for the annotators in this class. As in the mobilization class, the GPT-40 few-shot setting (f1 score = 0.57) and the Mistral zero-shot setting yield the best results (f1 score = 0.58). Both models show higher precision and lower recall in both settings. The Mistral performs best in identifying the phatic class and the informative class, while GPT-40 performs best in identifying the mobilization class.

6 Error analysis

Both the manual annotation and the automatic classification show the difficulties in identifying phatic texts in our dataset of German political talk. This is consistent with Frenzel and Hautli-Janisz (2025) results who tested the idenitification of small talk on German verbatim transcribed Public Service En-

counters (dataset: Espinoza et al. (2024)). While small talk is not identical to phatic political talk, a comparison is valid from a computational point of vie, as Espinoza et al. (2024) define small talk as polite conservation over light topics (Schneider, 1988) with the purpose of maintaining social relations for their study.

Both human annotators and models struggle most with identifying the phatic class (highest f1score=0.58). While models perform best at identifying the informative class (highest f1-score=0.87), humans have the least dissent in annotating the mobilizing class. For the human annotators, some ambiguity exists between the mobilizing and the informative class (see: Tab. 2): While the example given informs about time and place of an event in Dessau, and could thus be labeled as informative, the exclamation mark makes the sentence sound like a call to join the event, and could thus be labeled as mobilizing class. Similarly, the informative and the phatic class can be confused when information is anecdotal or of little importance: Our example names the number of people, time and place, but focuses on the fact that lights lit up the banks of the Main river. While informative, the example could fit two aspects of phatic communication: On the one hand, it fits Miller (2017)'s definition of a general affability without exchanging real information, or, even more likely in this case, the text evokes a sense of community (Radovanovic and Ragnedda, 2012; Miller, 2017).

7 Discussion

In this paper, we aim at detecting phatic communication in political talk. For this purpose, a case study is conducted based on the hashtags of #NieWiederIstJetzt and #WirSindMehr. First, two annotators enriched the data with the labels phatic, mobilizing, and informative. Second, the performance of the classifiers Mistral and GPT-40 is tested, in both zero- and few-shot-settings. The annotators reach a kappa score of 0.62 which corresponds to moderate agreement. In general, the models perform better in a few-shot-setting. Only for classifying the informative class, there is no difference between the zero- and few-shot setting with Mistral- it yields the highest f1-score of 0.87 in both settings.

In summary, humans and models perform best in identifying the informative class, second best on the mobilizing class, and worst in identifying the phatic class. This also shows in the ambiguity between the annotators for the phatic class: Annotator 1 labels 12% texts more as phatic than annotator 2 (30.5% vs 18.8%).

It is well known that phatic communication is prevalent in social media. Some even argue that social media are phatic media in which communication without content has taken precedence (Miller, 2008). Nevertheless, researches have demonstrated the importance of phatic communication, as it fulfills a social function (Sarjanoja et al., 2013; Rettberg, 2018). While similar phenomena such as small talk have been studied from the lens of natural language processing (Frenzel and Hautli-Janisz, 2025) (also for 'candy speech', the shared task at GermEval 2025²). Others have studied the reception of phatic communication (Sarjanoja et al., 2013) or its different forms in various platform affordances (Niemelä-Nyrhinen and Seppänen, 2020; Radovanovic and Ragnedda, 2012; Rettberg, 2018).

In this paper, we ask how phatic political talk is in reality. Using non-argumentative sentences from a corpus of political talk from Instagram captions, we conclude the following: Firstly, annotators label between 18.8% and 30.5% of the corpus as phatic, which is a substantial amount. On the other hand, between 81.2% and 69.5% of the non-argumentative statements in the corpus is not phatic, but serves an informative or mobilizing function. Thirdly, the biggest dissent concerns the distinction between the phatic class and the informative class, demonstrating that the annotators struggle with the question whether a sentence is informative or not. Considering that the number of phatic texts in the argumentative part of the corpus (from where the non-argumentative sentences analyzed here have been gathered) is probably much lower, we conclude that political talk on Instagram is not primarily phatic. It rather has a high amount of informative content, and some mobilizing content.

Nevertheless, more work should be done to investigate phatic content in a quantitative manner: Our findings should be tested for political talk under other hashtags. Secondly, the distributions could be platform-specific, highlighting the importance to investigate distributions on Tiktok or other platforms. The analysis should be extended to other corpora and platforms. In addition, one

²yuliacl.github.io/GermEval2025-Flausch-Erkennung/

could investigate whether different political actors post different amounts of phatic communication. For example, it is likely that organizations post more informative and mobilizing content, while private users post phatically more often. It is also conceivable to perform a more fine-grained classification of phatic communication based on the codebook introduced in section 4.1.1. From a technological point of view, prompt engineering could also be applied to enhance the classification results. An idea could be to include stakes and bribes, as recommended by Pichler et al. (2025).

Limitations

This work is limited to the analysis of only one platform. This work could benefit from an additional annotation. Considering the identified sources of disagreement, the annotators would benefit from additional training.

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	Mistral ZS	Mistral FS	GPT4 ZS	GPT4 FS
Precision	0.79	0.75	0.58	0.69
Recall	0.46	0.39	0.31	0.49
F1-Score	0.58	0.51	0.40	0.57

Table 3: Comparison of the different models for the classification of the phatic class.

	Mistral ZS	Mistral FS	GPT4 ZS	GPT4 FS
Precision	0.85	0.82	0.87	0.81
Recall	0.89	0.92	0.67	0.78
F1-Score	0.87	0.87	0.76	0.79

Table 4: Comparison of the different models for the classification of the informative class.

	Mistral ZS	Mistral FS	GPT4 ZS	GPT4 FS
Precision	0.59	0.67	0.36	0.53
Recall	0.62	0.49	0.90	0.92
F1-Score	0.60	0.57	0.51	0.67

Table 5: Comparison of the different models for the classification of the mobilization class.

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A Appendix: Annotation guidelines

Table 6: Annotation instructions for labeling non-argumentative sentences as phatic, informative, or mobilizing.

Class	Guidelines
Phatic communica-	
tion	• If the text conveys sociability or affability without transmitting substantive information
	• If the text that evokes a sense of community
	• If the text creates the impression of sharing an experience in real time
	• If the text shares news as a conversation starter
	• If the text appears uninteresting, boring, or mundane
Informative text	
	 If the text contains background information about people, organizations, or situations
	• If the text include reports on political events or actions
	• If the text is an announcement sharing time, place, or date details
	• If the text include specific notes, e.g., "No party symbols, but neutral banners are okay".
	• If the text marks a short headline
Mobilizing text	
	• If the text is a slogan or short invitations aimed at motivating action
	• If the text contains a direct calls, e.g., "Give @mention a like and comment on their post to help the cause."
	Include indirect calls to action
	• If there is an invitations to participate in events, e.g., "All Magde burgers are invited to participate in the commemoration of victims of antisemitism."